

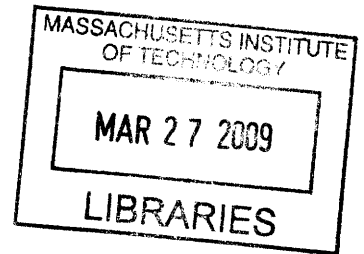
**The Yellow Revolution in Malwa:  
Alternative Arenas of Struggle and the Cultural Politics of Development**

by

Richa Kumar

B.S.F.S.

Georgetown University, 2001



Submitted to the Program in Science, Technology and Society  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Doctor of Philosophy in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology and Society  
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# **The Yellow Revolution in Malwa: Alternative Arenas of Struggle and the Cultural Politics of Development**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation engages with two analytical frameworks to explore questions of social transformation and structures of power in rural society in India. The first is a specific critique of various types of development discourse and development projects that have been elaborated by national and international elites during the last forty years, focusing on the dryland Malwa region in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. This includes a project to introduce soyabean cultivation to the region in the 1970s, which has been post-facto labeled as a yellow revolution, and a discourse which argues that providing market information through new information and communication technologies is empowering farmers. I argue that these projects and discourse have mostly steered away from engaging with the structures of power framing rural society, and thus, have failed to bring about much change in the condition of rural people in central India.

The second analytical framework is a recovery and foregrounding of alternate arenas of struggle that rural people in the Malwa region have been participating in. The platform of democratic politics is one such avenue that marginalised groups have used to make demands upon the state to provide them with support and allows them to hold the state accountable for the same. Participating in cultural projects that question and subvert the forms of caste and gender based exclusion that frame the lives of people is another such arena which provides women and adivasis (tribals) with a language of empowerment. This research argues that for the language and practice of development to have more relevance to the lives of the poor and for it to engage with the deeper aspirations in their lives, the role of these political and cultural projects as vital platforms for rural people to exercise agency and bring about change, must be recognized.

Thesis Supervisor: Kenneth Keniston

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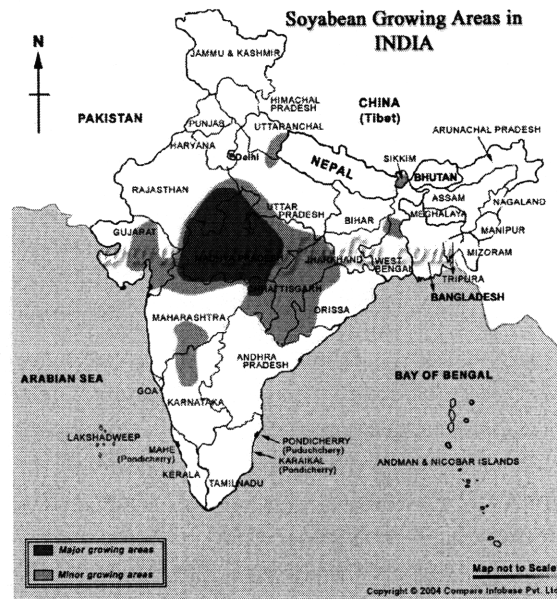
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## Maps

(Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com) Accessed January 2008)

**Map 1. Soyabean growing areas in India**



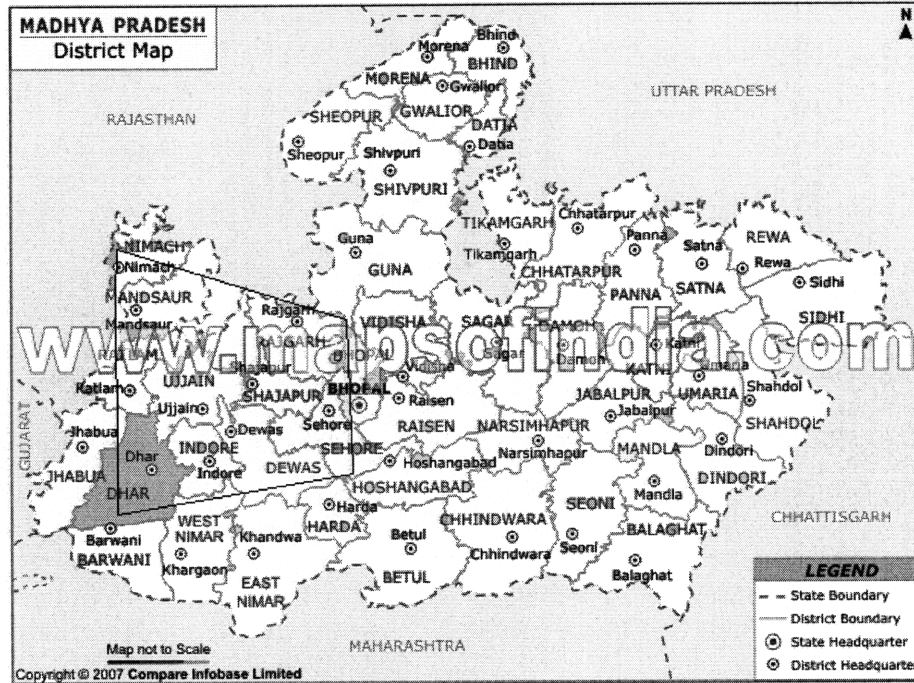
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## Introduction

Since the 1990s widespread changes have occurred in how development has been conceptualised. The idea of participatory development gained prominence as a response to the accusations against development organisations and governments of pursuing high modernist agendas unrelated to the lives of ordinary people (Scott 1998), which some saw as reinforcing power structures rather than bringing about development (Ferguson 1994). It coincided with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the *dirigiste* state in many countries of the world, and the subsequent shift away from state-led models of development. Organisations like the World Bank promoted participatory development<sup>1</sup> alongside a push towards market-led models of development through structural adjustment programs and an agenda of good governance (Marquette 2003). The encouragement of civil society organisations, which were considered to be separate from the state and a balance to bureaucratic power (Taylor 1990, Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001) were regarded as pivotal to the successful implementation of the participatory agenda (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

Towards the end of the 1990s, the information technology revolution provided a new set of tools in the hands of development practitioners to encourage participation of the poor and provide them with relevant information on markets, health, and livelihoods, which they were deemed to lack (World Bank 1995, Dahlman 1999). The idea was that

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<sup>1</sup> Such a shift in the agenda of the World Bank can be traced to the international impact of the Narmada Bachao Andolan that brought to the attention of people around the world the condition of adivasi villagers in the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India due to displacement by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. The World Bank withdrew from funding the project amid concerns that proper rehabilitation measures had not been taken up and people had been uprooted from their villages without much concern for their livelihood and future survival (Baviskar 1995).

empowered with this information, the poor could then become responsible for their own development. This fit in very well with the neoliberal, market-based understanding of development that was being implemented in places like Chile and Egypt under the aegis of the World Bank (Paley 2001a, Elyacher 2002).

Rural India became a crucible for numerous experiments and projects that sought to bring information technology to rural areas and villagers were expected to become empowered by obtaining information on market prices, government schemes, agricultural technologies, health, and so on.<sup>2</sup> One of the first such projects was started in January 2000 by a young dynamic bureaucrat in the district administration of Dhar district in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (MP). Dhar lies at the edge of the Malwa plateau in western Madhya Pradesh and is one of the poorest districts of the country. MP has historically placed at the bottom of the list of human development indicators in comparison to other states (Shah 2005b, Vijay Shankar 2005, Ghosh 2005). It is also home to the largest adivasi (tribal) populations in the country (20.3%) and nearly 55% of the population of Dhar district is adivasi. Known as *Gyandoot* (Messenger of Knowledge), the project used information technology to provide villagers with access to government services and a means to air their grievances to the district administration.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a sample of some descriptive and some critical studies on several ICT projects in India see Bhatnagar and Schware 2000, Kumar 2001, Keniston 2001, Centre for Electronic Governance 2002, Kumar and Jhunjhunwala 2002, Hudson 2002, Malhotra 2002, Singh 2004, Keniston and Kumar 2004, Kumar Rajendra 2004, Kumar 2004, Benjamin 2005, Dileepkumar 2005, Kiran 2005, Srinivasan 2004, Kumar 2005a, Punathambekar 2005, Sreekumar 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The project established computers in 21 villages of the district and linked them through radio wave technology. Each computer ran software, which enabled villagers to access to government services such as application forms for birth, death, caste and income certificates, complaints for non-working services like broken handpumps, and market prices of major crops. A few anecdotes about benefits such as receiving old age pensions, overdue salaries, repairing handpumps, and higher prices for produce became nuggets that would repeatedly surface in newspaper articles, email listservs, and academic writing (See Kumar 2001, Centre for Electronic Governance 2002, and Sreekumar 2007). See Map 2 for the location of Madhya Pradesh in India and Map 3 for the location of Dhar district in Madhya Pradesh.

The chief minister of MP, Digvijay Singh proclaimed that the project would bring the benefits of information technology directly to the people and make the bureaucracy more transparent and democratic (The Hindu 2000). The project won the prestigious Stockholm Challenge Award for using information and communication technologies (ICTs) for Community Development that year.

Yet, less than a year later, the Gyandoot project was floundering. Like several other IT for development projects in India, Gyandoot became one in a long list of failures. In most projects, few people participated, it was unclear whose needs were met, and the road towards development was littered with unused computers and broken equipment. In 2000, I interned with TARAhaat, one of the earliest organisations to put computers in villages in northern Madhya Pradesh and then in 2001-2002, I worked with n-Logue Communications to implement internet-based services for villagers in Tamil Nadu. But having implemented and studied rural ICT projects and having seen them fail,<sup>4</sup> the question that deeply troubled me was “What is it that we are trying to change?” It is very exotic to show images of villagers in colourful turbans and women in saris surrounding a computer—I had taken enough such pictures myself. But was the information empowering them? If people used the kiosks did that amount to “participation”? Did this mean we were bringing development? From whose perspective was any change labelled as development?

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<sup>4</sup> I did a comparative study of three rural Internet kiosk projects in India based upon field work in northern Madhya Pradesh with TARAhaat, as part of my honors thesis at Georgetown University in 2000-2001. Then I spent a year (2001-2002) establishing village internet centres in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and developing and driving various commercial online applications in agriculture, e-governance, health and veterinary support under the aegis of the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras and the company n-Logue Communications. In the summer of 2004, I conducted fieldwork in Sirsa district, Haryana, studying an e-governance project started by a private company, Drishtee Dot Com Ltd. None of these projects were successful in sustaining the provision of development-related services to villagers and most of the kiosks have either closed down or have been converted to commercial cybercafés or computer training centres.

Around the same time, ITC-IBD, India's largest agribusiness started another set of village internet centres known as *eChoupal*, in the soyabean<sup>5</sup> growing areas of Madhya Pradesh, known as the Malwa plateau.<sup>6</sup> The *eChoupal* was to provide farmers with information on market prices of soyabean and help them get a better price for their crops while helping the company reduce its procurement costs and increase its market share. By 2002, there were nearly 800 *eChoupals* in Malwa, in 2003, business schools like Harvard and Kellogg were including them as a case study on how to use information technology to connect with underserved market segments (Assisi and Gupta 2003), and in 2004, the *eChoupals* also won the Stockholm Challenge Award in the e-Business category. Despite the failure of many ICT projects, the *eChoupals* were consistently labelled a success.

My initial research in Malwa in 2002-03 started out with the aim of understanding what had changed in the lives of villagers with the introduction of the *eChoupals* in the context of a liberalised India post-1991. But, claims that the *eChoupals* were transforming rural India and connecting farmers to a digital age rang hollow in face of evidence that computers were not being used for obtaining information or conducting transactions (Kumar 2005b). During my fieldwork, it soon became evident that much more extensive change had happened in Malwa with the introduction of soyabean cultivation starting in the 1970s itself. This was a cash crop which could only be converted into value by processing it into soyabean meal or deoiled cake (DOC) and soyabean oil. This linked farmers through a chain of intermediaries to processing companies in India and consumers of meat abroad, where soyabean meal was used as

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<sup>5</sup> I use the Indian spelling of 'soyabean' rather than the American 'soybean' because that is how it is pronounced and understood in the Indian context by farmers, scientists, traders, processors, journalists, and academics.

<sup>6</sup> See Map 1 for the extent of soyabean cultivation in India in 2006 and Map 2 for the location of Madhya Pradesh in India. See Map 3 for the location of the Malwa region in Madhya Pradesh.



cattle-feed. Christened as the “Yellow Revolution” by scientists and policy makers, the introduction of soyabean cultivation was considered to be the foremost achievement by the state government to bring about the development of Madhya Pradesh.

Building upon this in my subsequent dissertation research I wanted to understand the meaning of development as a historical transformation from the perspective of rural villagers in Madhya Pradesh. However, when I started fieldwork in Ranipura village in Dhar district in 2006,<sup>7</sup> I could not connect computers or even the yellow revolution to the lives of everyday villagers. The informational view of development embodied in ICT projects was too narrowly transactional and ignored the broader agrarian context which influenced any rural intervention. But even the view of development embodied in the yellow revolution created a singular, heroic, teleological narrative that ignored increasing concerns amongst farmers about growing water scarcity and problems related to monocropping of soyabean. Further, the narrative enabled state actors to entirely appropriate the agency for bringing about change.

In this dissertation I explore the narratives of development in relation to the yellow revolution and the *eChoupals* based on fieldwork in Malwa for 18 months. My fieldwork raises a different set of questions about development. Why are the realities on the ground so different from what certain discourses of development lead us to expect? What are the underlying social relationships and historical dynamics taking place that are made invisible in these singular narratives of development? In trying to answer these questions, I want to join other ethnographic analyses of development that shift the focus of development from more abstract policy discussions to specific experiences of rural

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<sup>7</sup> See Map 3 for the location of Dhar district in Madhya Pradesh and Map 4 for the approximate location of Ranipura in Dhar district.

residents and their lives. Rather than narrowly utilising only the language of development, which assumes a certain teleology and evolutionary dynamic, I want to think about the transformations that have taken place in Malwa as “change” in a broader sense because that is how rural informants in Malwa themselves talk about it. Given the constant uncertainties present in the agrarian cycle, those I knew in Malwa did not immediately assume there is a teleological direction to change.

In addition, as opposed to focusing on the impact of *projects* that seek to bring about “development,” this research shifts the emphasis to the *agency* of rural people and to their own conceptions of “change.” In the development literature, the question of agency of those who are the “targets” of development projects has been conceived in two distinct but problematic ways. On the one hand, postdevelopmentalists<sup>8</sup> have argued for abandoning the development apparatus altogether and to allow communities to figure out on their own how to manage their resources and their lives (Escobar 1995b, 2000). But their romanticised notion of communities denied agency to those who were marginalised by social hierarchies at the community level; communities could be patriarchal, ecocidal or casteist (Agarwal 1996, Corbridge 1998). Moreover, the assumption that communities acted as cohesive units disguised the multiple, cross-cutting identities that members usually inhabited and which often created conflicting goals. On the other hand, those promoting market-led development have argued against state planning and development schemes, which they claim are ineffective (Panagariya 2008, Kapur et al. 2008a, 2008b). Instead, they call for empowering individuals with tools like information, credit, and even

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of postdevelopment originated in Latin America. Postdevelopmentalists argued that development had done nothing except to promote a project of control and appropriation of resources from the world's poor (Esteva and Prakash 1998). But their monolithic construction of development discourse and uncritical glorification of community suppressed the heterogeneity of voices within both.

direct cash transfers, and trusting them to be utility maximizing agents who would make choices in their own best interests. However, this approach ignores structural constraints as well as issues of power and inequality that circumscribe the choices people face and fails to acknowledge the importance of people's institutions, infrastructure, material inputs, skill development, and public investment in creating conditions for people to be able to make choices in the first place (Shah 2008a).

This research approaches the question of agency in relation to development somewhat differently. It asks, what are the ways in which rural people exercise agency that are not recognized by dominant narratives of development? It places the narratives of change framed around the *eChoupal* and the yellow revolution against the actual struggles for change that rural people participate in. This research asks, what is the locus of agency when rural people want to bring about change? What kinds of languages do they deploy in talking, demanding, and understanding change? What gets excluded and what is included in such conceptions of change? In doing so, I seek to invert prevailing notions of participatory development where rural people are the "targets" of projects conceived and implemented by someone else and instead focus on the agency of rural people themselves in bringing about change.

The paradigm of participation has become widespread in development discourse in recent decades. Yet it has also been increasingly questioned by scholars studying development projects. Some have criticised its neoliberal version as a means to divest the state of all responsibility for ensuring the welfare of poor populations and to put the onus on the poor themselves (Paley 2001a, Sharma 2008). Others have shown how it is an exercise limited to discussions and consultations with "target" populations but without

giving them or their representatives, actual decision-making powers (Walley 2004). Still others see it as continuing the problems inherent in older development projects—that of reproducing the social hierarchy rather than empowering the poor and the marginalised (Mosse 2005).

This research argues that development projects and discourses of development, even when attempting to be participatory, usually fail to engage at a deeper level with the structures of power that frame people's lives. I show how this is the case in Malwa where a prevailing discourse on information and empowerment speaks past farmers' everyday struggles in the marketplace; how depoliticised schemes of the state fail to engage with questions of livelihood that are of vital importance to adivasi labourers; and where the language of rights and entitlements fails to help women overcome oppression. While the people subjected to such projects are “always reframing, rethinking, and reshaping virtually everything that [comes] their way,” (Ortner 2001: 78) they are also involved in other struggles to overcome exclusion and exercise agency, which the language and practice of development does not recognize. In Malwa, these arenas include political struggles to obtain employment and higher wages and cultural projects such as religious revivalist movements like *Swadhyay*. *Swadhyay* is a Hindu religious movement started in the 1950s in western India that emphasizes the equality of all human beings and erases the boundaries of caste and patriarchy. It has become very popular in parts of Malwa in the last 20 years and has given an opportunity to women and lower caste groups to exercise agency and bring change to their lives. This research argues that such struggles need to be taken seriously and the arenas in which these struggles take shape must be included in thinking about change.

This dissertation engages with two analytical frameworks to explore questions of social transformation and structures of power. The first is a specific critique of various types of development discourse and development projects that have been elaborated by national and international elites during the last forty years. These grand schemes, to invoke James Scott (1998), have mostly steered away from engaging with the structures of power framing rural society, and thus, have failed to bring about much change in the condition of rural people in central India. The second is a recovery and foregrounding of alternate arenas of struggle that rural people in Malwa have been participating in. This research argues that these political and cultural projects, although unrecognized by the language and practice of development, are vital platforms for rural people to exercise agency and bring about change.

### **Historicizing and Critiquing the Idea of Development**

The term “development” gained currency in the historical juncture after WWII when decolonisation began and the model of the nation-state with its fixed borders, permanent militaries, and massive bureaucracies was replicated all over Asia and Africa. People of vastly different cultural and political histories were classified as citizens belonging to countries that were either ‘developed’ or ‘under-developed’ and development was defined a set of practices to improve economic growth in countries as measured through state-defined economic statistics (Abraham 1998, Escobar 1995a). The word “develop” originally related to “certain ideas of the nature of economic change,” which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became the “idea of a society passing through definite evolutionary stages” (Williams 1985: 103). The idea of development can be traced back to colonial projects of improvement in Africa and Asia, which were central to the

establishment, exercise and expansion of the colonial state's power (Hodgson 2001, Chatterjee 1993). In the 1930s and 40s, faced with nationalist protests in the colonies and labour unrest at home, colonial powers such as France and Britain used the idea of development to reassert their authority and expertise and relegitimize their imperial mandate (Cooper 1997).

With decolonization, development provided a new conceptual framework to stratify countries along a continuum from developed to under-developed which supported continued engagement of imperial powers in shaping the future of their ex-colonies. But at the same time, development was appropriated by national elites in the newly independent countries as a language of entitlement based on a “repudiated past and an imagined future” allowing them to reject the oppression and assimilate the best that Europe had to offer—a modern life and improved living standards (Cooper and Packard 1997). Multilateral institutions like the World Bank and United Nations formed at that time along with bilateral aid agencies became the sites where meanings of development were debated and contested. The Cold War created opportunities for the United States and the USSR to intervene in newly independent countries and increase their influence by offering technical assistance, and development became their mandate to enable the transition to a capitalist, industrial economy or a modern, socialist one (Ludden 1992, Cooper and Packard 1997). In the 1970s the meaning of development shifted towards the amelioration of poverty and material want (Ferguson 1994, Sen 1988) led in part by new aggregations of poverty statistics presented by development economists and shifts in leadership at the World Bank (Finnemore 1997).

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were several ideological shifts in thinking about development that set the stage for some of the changes that I saw unfolding during the time I did my fieldwork. By this time, disillusionment with development had set in. All the hopes of transformation raised by the demise of colonialism and the promise of development in the newly independent nation-states in Africa and parts of rural Asia had come to a nought. Amidst this failure, there emerged several critical studies of development projects by anthropologists. James Ferguson's influential book on Lesotho pointed out that the technical and bureaucratic language of development projects obscured the deeply politicized role they played in reconfiguring power relationships, especially in extending bureaucratic power (Ferguson 1994). Other critics argued that development projects increasingly reproduced unequal power relationships locally and disempowered the poor (Scott 1985, Mosse 2005). Development was further criticized for its teleological associations with progress (Ferguson 1999), its bias towards high-modernism (Scott 1998), and privileging expert (usually western) knowledge over indigenous forms of knowledge (Gupta 1998, Lansing 1991, Agrawal 1995, Pigg 1996, Walley 2004).<sup>9</sup>

Second, there was a shift away from conceptualizing development as the responsibility of the state, especially in the context of the demise of communism and the end of the Cold War, and the resurgence in free market models of "development". A credit squeeze in the 1980s created further financial pressure to slow down interventionist programs by the state. The views of a small group of neoliberal economists deriding corrupt and extractive (*dirigiste*) states became dominant especially in the context of

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<sup>9</sup> In places like Nepal, the language of development was also used by elites and development brokers within countries as a social marker to stratify people as traditional and backward and themselves as modern and developed (Pigg 1992, Shrestha 1995).

failed programs of state-led development (Cooper and Packard 1997, Harvey 2005). Development increasingly became about promoting free markets, free trade, and individual entrepreneurship. Further, neoliberal development promoted and relied upon the growth of information and communication technologies to enable aggregation of vast stores of information to guide actions in the marketplace (Harvey 2005). This was accompanied by the agenda of good governance where governments were expected to enforce contracts, uphold the law and prevent corruption, to ensure free markets worked efficiently (Corbridge 2007).

Third, the concept of civil society was revived as a counterpoint to the power of the state in countries shifting away from communism towards democratic forms of rule (Paley 2001b). Civil society usually refers to a public space of discourse that is separate from the state and is able to influence state policy to a varying degree (Taylor 1990, Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001). A sovereign democratic state's legitimacy is often derived from the popular will of civil society (Chatterjee 2004). In the 1990s, multilateral development organisations started describing the failure of forming stable democratic governments in Africa to a supposed lack of a thriving civil society, a discourse criticized by anthropologists (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Anthropologists like Julia Paley (2001b) have argued that rather than promoting greater democracy, strategies to promote civil society have become synonymous with legitimizing the weakening of the state's welfare functions and shifting the onus of development to the poor themselves. Paley further argues that such a shift erases the historical distinction between the state and civil society and raises questions whether the state can be held accountable for its development functions any longer (Paley 2001b: 3).



Fourth, there was a shift towards participatory development which was a response by multilateral and bilateral development agencies with the aim of involving local people in discussions of development and including non-governmental organisations as partners in development. Although people were “led to believe that participation meant the right to share in decision making,” in practice, participation could often be “ignored entirely” by project organizers or “reduced to the mere solicitation of opinions” (Walley 2004: 258). Participatory development was usually about target populations taking part in someone else’s projects. Neoliberal models of development conceptualized participation as empowering rational individuals and giving them the means to become responsible for their own well-being or development (Elyacher 2002, Sharma 2006). In efforts to reduce the welfare state, these models took away resources from the poor and marginalised and expected them to pay for making development interventions in education and health sustainable (Paley 2001a).

This research argues that the idea embodied in ICT projects like the *eChoupal* that providing information alone can empower farmers and bring about development frames empowerment as narrowly transactional, and overlooks broader structural processes of disempowerment that function in global agrarian markets like those of soyabean. Instead, it ethnographically demonstrates how farmers engage in struggles over power in the marketplace that are not recognized by this dominant discourse of information.

In doing so, this research argues that the focus of development must shift from seeing how target populations are resisting or reshaping projects of others, to understanding and participating in projects formulated by “target” populations themselves. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2001) makes a distinction between a form of

agency that expresses the ability or inability to exercise power within relationships (through domination and resistance), and another form of agency that expresses the ability of people to formulate and enact their own projects in the world.<sup>10</sup> The latter is defined by Ortner as the “agency of intention.” Focusing on the agency of intention allows us to see “people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality” (Ortner 2001: 81). This research illustrates how such projects become frameworks for people to exercise agency and engage with their fundamental aspirations about their lives.

Unlike the postdevelopmentalists, this research does not argue for uncritically glorifying a village community in places like Malwa. It acknowledges that communities come together on the basis of identities and interests that are constantly shifting and coalescing (Sharma 2008, Walley unpublished manuscript). People’s relationships and social positions produce cross-cutting multiple identities and interests that are often in conflict. This research argues that the platform of development does not allow the role of power in framing social relationships to be discussed. Development scholars have argued for engaging with development, despite its multiple failings, because it has kept poverty on the agenda as a discussable issue (Ferguson 1994, Cooper and Packard 1997, Parpart 1995, Corbridge 1998). But by framing the question of poverty outside the question of power, development refuses to recognize struggles of power that people are involved in.

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<sup>10</sup> See Karp 1986, Abu-Lughod 1990, Ortner 1996, and Ahearn 2001 for further discussions of the concept of agency as theorized by anthropologists.

## **State-led versus Market-led Development in India**

Internationally, the shift towards market-led development took place on an intensive scale in countries of Latin America and Southeast Asia. The idea that the state was expected to create the conditions to enable an institutional market framework (enforcing contracts and framing rules of engagement), but then it was to stay out, became popular in these places. The self-regulating market was expected to allocate resources efficiently and bring about economic growth (Colclough et al. 1991). Much of the critical discussion against market-led models of development has come from those studying Africa where international development agencies play a dominant role in organising development projects and most countries are characterised by weak states lacking control over resources.

In India, however, the neoliberal emphasis on markets to the exclusion of the state played out somewhat differently than in other regions. The state has remained central to discussions of development even in the period after liberalisation for two main reasons. First, India has been a mixed economy from the time of independence in 1947, even though planning played a vital role in shaping policy during the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, the state intervened in agrarian markets by establishing government-owned market yards in the 1970s to regularize and monitor the sale of agricultural produce. But more than 85-90% of the purchases in these market yards were undertaken by private traders holding licenses to trade (Hanumantha Rao 2006: 56). Hence, it is a misnomer to view projects like the *eChoupals* as a market intervention in agriculture competing with state actors—in effect they are competing against older private intermediaries in the

marketplace.<sup>11</sup> Further, even the staunchest supporters of free markets in India such as economists like Arvind Panagariya (2008) and Jagdish Bhagwati (1998) acknowledge the necessity of the state in supporting areas of market failure and providing a safety net for the millions of people below the poverty line, even as they disagree about the kind of support that should be given. Second, India has been governed by a stable democratic state that has used development as a justification for rule and has allowed groups to successfully make claims upon it in the name of development. For example, agrarian elites have been able to demand and obtain subsidies for electricity and fertilisers within the framework of the green revolution that spread across several parts of India starting in the 1960s. The state further announced minimum support prices (MSP) of various crops and directly purchased 10-15% of foodgrains produced in the country at MSP, mostly from the states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Post-liberalisation in 1991, only a few quantitative import restrictions on certain agricultural products were removed and no action whatsoever was taken on phasing out agricultural subsidies, ceasing state procurement of grain and the fixing of MSP for crops (Hanumantha Rao 2006). The history of development in India raises important questions about the stark opposition that is usually assumed between state and market actors and allows us to ask meaningful questions about what are the actual transformations taking place in the lives of rural residents.

1991 is considered to be a watershed year when the Indian economy was liberalised by the Congress government and the tenor of development shifted away from planning and towards the market. The government removed several trade barriers, de-

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<sup>11</sup> Just like other private traders the *eChoupal* is also regulated by market yard officials and its promoter company, ITC-IBD has to obtain a license to trade.

licensed industries, and opened sectors such as the media, telecommunications, automobiles, and others to private industry (Bhagwati 1993, Panagariya 2008). Short term compulsive circumstances arising out of a balance of payments crisis and a consequent structural adjustment program of the International Monetary Fund gave the impetus for this shift. Although neoliberal economists considered this to be an ideological victory and praised the central political leadership for keeping vested interests at bay (Bhagwati 1993), others have argued that the reforms proceeded by stealth (Jenkins 1999) and they primarily affected elite welfare, leaving areas more relevant to the masses relatively untouched (Sachs et al 1999).

However, emphasis on this shift as a critical break in the history of development in India, by policymakers and academics alike, has obscured much about the actual transformations that have taken place in rural India over the last 20 years. Corbridge and Harriss (2000) have rightly characterized the era of liberalization as the “*reinvention* of India as a market economy.” Such a reinvention serves to negate the history of the mixed economic practices adopted by the state throughout the years of planning and the existence of a vast private sector throughout the post-independence period (Sachs et al 1999, Gidwani 2008: 84). In the case of agriculture especially, the distinction between state and market-led development has never been clear at any point of time. After independence interventions in agriculture were a result of a variety of juxtapositions of state actors and market actors.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Even in the green revolution, which was claimed by the state as a state-driven process of development of agriculture, the technologies of water extraction (tubewells, pumps, etc.), technologies of mechanization (tractors, tillers, spray pumps, etc.), and technologies of managing pests (pesticides) were all manufactured and sold by private companies, ostensibly in a relatively unregulated marketplace (apart from the safety regulations).

By exploring the history of the introduction of soyabean cultivation in Malwa, this research shows how global markets, private companies, government scientists, government-promoted cooperative societies, and farmers themselves were all critical actors in the story—one which began in the 1970s and not post-liberalisation. Each actor had a different, possibly competing, conception of development ranging from alleviation of protein malnutrition to self-sufficiency of edible oil in the country, and from saving the country precious foreign exchange to becoming “good farmers.” But more importantly, the yellow revolution was the result of an imbrication of a variety of forces stemming from a myriad set of human and non-human actors, such as the technical characteristics of soyabean, the geology and cropping practices of Malwa, and the properties of water and wheat (Bijker and Law 1992, Latour 1992, Mitchell 2002, Caliskan 2007, Gidwani 2008).

This framing of the state in opposition with the market is a symbolic construct that is the foundation of the neoliberal framework. Such a symbolic ideological distinction is used by policy makers and academics to emphasize issues of efficiency of using resources as technical matters (that should not be in the hands of a messy, politicized state) and thus, to mask political questions of access to resources and of inequality and power. This approach collapses complex relationships between credit, land endowment, and access to infrastructural facilities, for instance, into a singular variable—“lack of information”—that is deemed to be ailing farmers. The focus of development then becomes the following: is the state a better (or more efficient) provider of information to farmers or is it the market? This takes attention away from more pressing concerns of farmers such as availability of proper roads, cheap transport, and access to

institutional credit, which may require both private and public interventions. Further, recognizing that the state and the market are deeply imbricated in each other and cannot be separated, forces one to go beyond questions of mere allocation towards understanding how the power of these institutions is reworking social relationships and is also being shaped by them.

### **Participating in Alternative Arenas of Struggle**

In thinking about alternative arenas of struggle, I have found Partha Chatterjee's concept of "political society" (2004) drawn from Michel Foucault's notion of "governmentality" as a fruitful device to "think with and against" (John and Deshpande 2008: 83). Chatterjee is amongst the foremost theorists of postcolonial society and politics today who foregrounds larger issues of justice and to some extent, historical change. He may be amongst the earliest to transfer the concept of "governmentality" described by Michel Foucault (1991) to understand colonial and postcolonial rule in his path-breaking work, *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993).

In contrast to sovereignty, which is characterised by rule over territory, governmentality, according to Foucault, is rule over populations with the explicit purpose of the welfare of the population, which is achieved by transforming the conduct of the population using technologies of rule (Foucault 1991). While Foucault's analysis drew upon the experience of modern European states, Chatterjee reconfigured his concept to describe colonial rule. Chatterjee (1993) argued that colonization was a different form of political rationality where the colonial project was to improve the population and transform it into a self-governing, self-disciplined civil society like the west. Yet, at the same time, this project always considered colonized populations as the 'other',

specifically along racial lines, and thus, incapable of self-governance (cf. Scott 1999, Prakash 1999). In the late 1980s, historians of South Asia such as Bernard Cohn were amongst the earliest to describe how technologies of rule under colonialism helped mould and essentialise many of the identities and images of colonized people that came to be thought of as traditional and, thus, requiring transformation to become developed (Cohn 1987, 1996, Pant 1987, Dirks 1992).<sup>13</sup> However, Chatterjee's work was amongst the first to describe and theorise such a process in India as governmentality.

David Ludden (1992) has traced the roots of India's development regime to this form of colonial governmentality where technologies of rule such as enumeration, surveying and measurement are used create knowledge of populations and thus, expand state power. Historians have argued that the postcolonial Indian state continued to exercise this form of political rationality, using development as the instrument to claim legitimacy for centralized state power (Bose 1997).

In the particular context of central India, the work of anthropologists Amita Baviskar and Nandini Sundar has focused on the plight of adivasis or tribals who form more than 20% of the population of the state of Madhya Pradesh and who are amongst the most marginalised groups in India today. Their work describes how technologies of enumeration and permanent settlement to make populations legible to the colonial powers for taxation and control, marginalized adivasis from access to land and forests, making them more vulnerable and dispossessed (Baviskar 1995, Sundar 1997). Development projects ignored such past histories of inequality and oppression, reframing the problem in depoliticized terms as one of overpopulation or overgrazing, and blamed the failure of

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<sup>13</sup> See Dorothy Hodgson's book, *Once Intrepid Warriors*, on the Maasai for a similar argument made in the context of Africa (2001).



their solutions on the stubbornness and backwardness of the people (Ferguson 1994, Hodgson 2001, Mitchell 2002).

Against this depoliticized history, there was a shift in the 1990s in the strategy of development organisations to include a mandate to revive civil society in non-western countries. Historically, the concept of civil society has its roots in western European thought and refers to a public space of discourse that is separate from the state and is able to influence state policy to a varying degree (Taylor 1990). As I argued earlier, civil society was deemed to be the space of democratic politics and the failure of development was blamed on the lack of a thriving civil society, especially in countries in Africa. Whereas academics have questioned whether the western concept of civil society can be transferred to explain political processes in non-western societies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), Chatterjee (2004) has questioned the concept of civil society more fundamentally from a postcolonial perspective.

He argues that “most people in the world” are governed not within the framework of a state and civil society where they are individual rights-bearing citizens who can make claims upon the state using the language of rights. Although theoretically, all individuals in a democratic nation-state are rights-bearing citizens, Chatterjee argues that in practice, such a framework is limited to a demographically limited subset, that he labels the urban bourgeois civil society. Rather, he invokes the notion of a “political society” which is the space created by “governmentalisation of the state.” Here, people are not individual citizens but are a part of populations that are enumerated and categorised. The state derives “legitimacy not by the participation of citizens in matters of state but by claiming to provide for the well-being of the population” (Chatterjee 2004:

34). Chatterjee argues that groups in political society inhabit a space of illegality.<sup>14</sup> Yet they make claims upon the state using the language of rights and invoke the moral obligation of the state to think about their welfare.<sup>15</sup> In effect, he inverts Foucault's structuralist argument to give agency to the people who are governed through technologies of rule, calling it "politics of the governed."<sup>16</sup>

Recently, this issue has emerged as a high profile contested arena of argument in relation to democratic politics and development particularly in India. Chatterjee's book, *The Politics of the Governed* (2004), and his article "Democracy and Economic Transformation in India" (2008a) which applies the framework of political society to rural India, have generated responses from various academics studying issues of development and equity in India (Corbridge 2007, Sharma 2008, Shah 2008b, Baviskar and Sundar 2008, John and Deshpande 2008), many of them studying and working in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>17</sup>

Stuart Corbridge (2007) has highlighted Chatterjee's work as an important contribution towards critiquing the new agenda of participatory development, which glorifies civil society and good governance. Chatterjee suggests that the very rules that

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<sup>14</sup> Chatterjee's analysis centres on urban India and his use of illegality reflects the illegal nature of the existence of most slum dwellers and migrants in India's burgeoning cities. Taking his examples from Kolkata, Chatterjee describes the political action undertaken by slum dwellers to continue to occupy the land on which they live (in the face of constant threat of eviction), to obtain electricity connections, install drainage and sanitation systems, and to obtain official papers such as voters' ID cards and ration cards without which they cannot claim an existence as legal citizens. However, this framework of illegality does not map onto rural India in quite the same way and can further marginalise the poor as I argue later on in this introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Groups which form a part of political society can be based on identities such as ethnicity, caste, race, religion, or tribe or based on interests such as living in a squatter settlement or being part of an unorganised firm.

<sup>16</sup> I owe this insight to Peter Perdue.

<sup>17</sup> A discussion on the applicability of Chatterjee's framework to rural India has taken place in recent issues of the journal *Economic and Political Weekly*. See Chatterjee 2008a and responses to it by Shah 2008b, Baviskar and Sundar 2008, and John and Deshpande 2008, as well as Chatterjee's comments to their responses (2008b).

govern civil society frame the actions and claims of the groups in political society as illegal. Thus, although these groups make claims upon the state using the language of rights and morality, because their existence and their claims are deemed illegal, state agencies only treat these claims as entitlements which are distributed on the basis of political expediency (Chatterjee 2004: 40). Projects to promote civil society in conjunction with good governance reject such politically-motivated (re)distributions as corrupt and illegal. But this has the effect of furthering the marginalisation of “most people in the world” who can only make their claims within political society, argues Corbridge. In thinking about the agency of marginalised groups in rural India, does the notion of political society help us characterize the alternative arenas for struggles that rural groups are participating in?

Chatterjee maps civil and political society along the lines of class, arguing that political society is composed of the poor and the rural. But this emphasis, at the risk of excluding other lines of stratification such as caste, religion, region, and gender to name a few, can be problematic when mapping it over the rural, agrarian landscape in India (Shah 2008b). Chatterjee removes low caste groups and tribals, who constitute the bulk of poor farmers and landless labourers, from the category of political society arguing that they are marginal groups who do not have enough political power or representatives they can hold accountable (Chatterjee 2008a: 61). Instead, he frames the opposition between civil and political society as one between urban bourgeois corporate capital and “peasants,” presumably medium and large farmers.<sup>18</sup> This mapping is based upon his

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<sup>18</sup> More than 70% of farmers in India farm less than one hectare of land and are considered to be marginal farmers who are also dependent on other sources of income. A further 16% are small farmers cultivating 1-2 hectares of land (NSSO 2006). Having excluded marginal farmers from political society, Chatterjee

experience of the agrarian milieu of West Bengal, which has seen increasing peasant unrest in the face of land acquisition by the state for the purpose of industrialisation. He argues that peasants are making morally righteous demands upon the state in the face of the looming threat from corporate capital, particularly after liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 (Chatterjee 2008a, 2008b).

However, in the context of the yellow revolution in Madhya Pradesh, medium and large farmers have used categories like “good farmers” [*acche kisan*] to make claims upon the state which are at the same time deployed to exclude poor and marginalized farmers from any access to the land or to subsistence. Can these claims be considered morally righteous? Moreover, rather than being a recent response to the looming threat of corporate capital, the claims made upon the state by these farmers go back to the green and yellow revolutions that took root in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>19</sup> By positioning this group against corporate capital exemplified by companies like Cargill, Monsanto, and ITC-IBD, which are penetrating the rural agrarian market, Chatterjee positions it as a marginalised group. But this research argues that by generally valorizing the methods of medium and large farmers to make claims upon the state as a legitimate expression of “political society,” Chatterjee’s framework is reinforcing the power of those who are already

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presumably is referring to the 30% small, medium and large farmers, who are usually upper caste, and who continue to have a stake in agriculture and can expect their next generation to live off the land.

<sup>19</sup> In the 1960s, a combination of the availability of hybrid seed technologies, populist measures of the state to ensure its own survival, and a growing demand for state support of rural interests through subsidies coalesced into the green revolution and subsequently brought benefits to a group of middle to large farmers in select areas of the country (Varshney 1995, Rudolph et al. 1987, Gupta 1998, Frankel 2005). These benefits included waiver of unpaid cooperative society and national bank loans, subsidized electricity, and subsidies on fertilisers, and an increase in the minimum support price (MSP) when the state purchases food crops such as wheat and rice. Since then such demands are routinely promised in various election manifestos and usually fulfilled prior to the next round of elections. The cooperative societies became one of the primary means for politically-mediated (re)distribution of government largesse, which was always “a matter of constant political negotiation and the results [we]re never secure or permanent” (Chatterjee 2008a: 58).

powerful members of rural society.<sup>20</sup> Mapping the rural has to take into account specific geographies, agricultural histories and practices, and social and political relationships, for it to reflect spaces of struggles inhabited by marginalised members of rural society. All these specificities can be distinct and different for various parts of India, including within the vast state of Madhya Pradesh itself.

On the other hand, Chatterjee's framework of political society recovers hitherto maligned spaces of democratic political action as important avenues for making claims upon the state and making it accountable. It is important to this discussion of development because it brings up the question of accountability. Development projects are generally accountable to the donors and project organisers as opposed to the people who they are supposed to develop, in contrast to elected representatives who are accountable to the people in their constituencies. It is within the space of political society that the latter respond to the claims of various constituents. Even when representatives of marginalised groups, such as landless adivasi labourers, are co-opted by more powerful political interests, the space to make morally righteous claims upon the state is still available to them in the form of political action. Compared to depoliticised development interventions that usually redistribute resources to marginalised populations without specifically addressing the question of marginalisation itself, political action is a crucial platform where marginalised groups can overcome their weaker position by holding a democratic state accountable and by obtaining entitlements. By rejecting the claims of

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<sup>20</sup> Ludden (1992) historicizes this process when he argues that the nationalist state inherited the discourse of improvement of agriculture using scientific techniques from the colonial state. This discourse enabled the entrenchment of the centralized state's power to provide productivity-enhancing inputs and change agrarian property relations and at the same time enabled agrarian profit makers, not subsistence-oriented peasants, to increase their economic and cultural power in a process that was a continuation from late pre-colonial times.

political society in the name of good governance, development fails to recognize the importance of these alternative arenas of struggle that engage directly with questions of power and that strongly influence any possibilities for change.

I would like to push the point of recognizing alternative arenas of struggle beyond the importance of politics alone. As James Ferguson (1994) and now Partha Chatterjee (2004) have argued, development discourse leaves out politics from the frame of discussion. This research seeks to show that development discourse also considers “undiscussable” other aspects about people’s social and cultural lives (cf. Walley unpublished manuscript). The lines of exclusion<sup>21</sup> that frame rural society are often taken as a given by development projects. Even if development assistance is targeted to marginalised groups such as “poor women” or “adivasis,” such projects might hope to overcome the forms of social exclusion that people find themselves in but they don’t lend themselves to critiquing the nature of those lines of exclusion or how they came to be in place. At the same time, development discourse sees as extraneous any cultural projects, including those that provide a platform to engage in struggles against the lines of exclusion in society. Development discourse views culture either as traditional, and hence something to be overcome, or as a justification for certain practices and hence, to be valorised. Between the modernizers and the cultural relativists, the idea of culture as a process of meaning making and a means of social organisation through ties of kinship and ritual, as well as other ways, is lost.

This research suggests that cultural projects can be fruitful arenas of struggle against exclusions in society. In the case of Malwa, this has emerged through a religious

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<sup>21</sup> I owe this phrase to Christine Walley.

revivalist movement known as *Swadhyay* which has helped marginalised groups overcome exclusion generated by a caste-based and patrilineal society. *Swadhyay* does not accept caste differences and is based on the central tenet that each person is equal—the same blood flows through all our bodies. It is based on Hindu philosophy espoused by the Gita, a holy book part of the mythical epic of Mahabharata and was founded in the 1950s by a Brahmin from Maharashtra. It is popular in parts of western India (Hardiman 2007: 57-60), and took root in Ranipura in 1995. Development practitioners might expect to see *Swadhyay* as supporting Hindu religious practices that marginalise women and lower castes. But in contrast, by participating in this movement, upper caste women and semi-educated adivasi families in Ranipura have been able to exercise agency and feel empowered through culturally constructed subject positions. Young girls and married women are able to challenge patriarchal controls over their physical movements, their voices, and their ability to become literate—creating possibilities for even greater control over choices made in their lives.

Sherry Ortner, in a discussion of agency amongst the Sherpa mountaineering community in Nepal, argues that although symbolic orders like cultures or discourses are systems of domination, such forms generate meanings through which subjects are able to formulate actions and enact their intentions and desires (1997). This enables a discussion of empowerment that can take place within cultural contexts, with the recognition that the same context is also structuring the actions and intentions of subjects. *Swadhyay* provides one such cultural context that enables some women and some adivasis to resist marginalisation while at the same time has the potential to disempower upper caste men who have customarily formulated and maintained lines of exclusion in rural society. The

discourse of development does not acknowledge that cultural projects like *Swadhyay* can play a role in providing alternative arenas for struggles of marginalised groups, and in the process, bring about change that addresses the deep aspirations of their lives in ways that discourses of development may not. In paying attention to cultural projects like *Swadhyay*, this research also resists an uncritical condemnation of all religious activities as fundamentalist. The heterogeneity in cultural practices and the possibility of positive transformation through cultural politics should be explored as an equally important alternative arena of struggle.

### **Negotiating Social Respectability in Malwa**

Before I could begin extensive ethnographic research in Malwa, I had to first learn the importance of creating and maintaining social respectability to make people comfortable in their interactions with me and enlist their support for long term research. I first conducted research in Malwa in December 2002 and January 2003 when I was specifically studying the *eChoupals*, internet centres started by ITC-IBD, India's largest agribusiness. I returned to Malwa in July 2005 for another short stint researching the *eChoupals*, this time in Sehore district. My dissertation research began in January 2006 and my first task was to find a village. I intended to spend a year or so living there and doing research, and to explore what ordinary farmers thought about the yellow revolution and the *eChoupals*. Since the Malwa plateau was the region in MP which grew the most soyabean, I decided to choose a village around its main city of Indore. But I did not realise how difficult it would be to find the "right" village for my research. The difficulty, I would later realise, stemmed less from the characteristics of different villages from



which I was trying to choose and more from my own social positioning as a lone woman researcher with no suitable local connections to categorize me in a respectable role.

Since I had no personal connections to the Malwa region, I started with meeting agricultural policy-makers and soyabean scientists to ask about potential villages I could study. I met people at the Agricultural Department in the capital city of Bhopal and scientists at the main soyabean research centres in MP—Sehore Agricultural College in Sehore town and the National Research Centre for Soyabean in the city of Indore. Through them I was directed to meet farmers in Dewas, Ujjain, Indore and Dhar districts who had connections with these research institutes. These farmers were described to me as “good farmers” [*acche kisan*] who implemented new techniques, participated in seed-breeding programs and pursued the goal of higher productivity. I stayed in the city of Indore and travelled by myself using a hired car and driver to visit these farmers who lived within a 100-kilometer radius of the city. Their homes and farms reflected a revolution. With multiple tractors, threshers, even harvesters in their houses, small warehouses to stock their produce, and large houses made of concrete and with modern furniture and appliances, they looked as prosperous as any urban middle class or even upper middle class family. But after meeting four or five of them, I increasingly felt that these were not the farmers I wanted to study.

I was looking for the bullock farmers rather than the tractor farmers, who I had met in various villages during my earlier stints of research. I wanted to pick an ordinary, average, not-so-well-off Indian village and study the yellow revolution from the perspective of the people inhabiting it. My main criteria included a plurality of castes, average population size of about 500-600 people, somewhat distributed landholding, and

not very rich farmers. Even if I wanted to choose one of the villages of these rich farmers, none of them agreed to host me in their own village nor offered to help me in finding a village to study. One of them, a young farmer in his late twenties from Dewas district, whose family I visited several times during my first six months in the field, even dissuaded me from my quest. He cited practical concerns and said that a young woman like me should not think about living in any village. However, I did not pay heed to his advice. I kept travelling to different villages around Indore and meeting farmers, scientists, government officials, soyabean processing company owners, and other acquaintances I had made during my stay in the city.

As I learnt more about Madhya Pradesh, I realised that part of my problem stemmed from the diversity of the place. At the end of colonial rule in 1947 Madhya Pradesh was created as fractious union of areas made up of princely states in Malwa and Bundelkhand, which had been under indirect British rule, and tribal areas in Central Provinces and Berar, which were directly ruled by the British. In 1956, after the linguistic reorganization of the states in the country, anything leftover in the central part of the country became a part of MP, making it an amalgam of differences (Wilcox 1968). The southern-eastern part of the state and the south-western edge was thickly forested forming part of the Vindhya and Satpura mountain ranges. These hilly regions were mostly inhabited by adivasis, who had been pushed into less fertile areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the conquest of parts of MP by Rajputs and Marathas. South of the mountains were the plains of Nimar through which the majestic Narmada river flowed along the southern boundary of the state, and which were inhabited mostly by Patidar farmers from Gujarat (Baviskar 1995). The northern and north-eastern areas received heavy rainfall and were

part of the Indo-Gangetic plain. The western part consisted of the Malwa plateau, a section of the of the large Deccan trap that was a result of layers and layers of volcanic rock and lava melt. This area has historically been the most prosperous part of the state both agriculturally and through links with trading networks in Bombay and Gujarat. It received medium rainfall and farmers grew cotton, opium, sugarcane, and primarily, wheat. Each of these regions has disparate geographies, languages, cultural practices, and political organisation, making any comparative analysis across the entire state riddled with difficulties. More problematically, the districts of Sehore, Dhar and Dewas straddle the Malwa plateau, the Vindhya mountains, and the Nimar plains—hence any information about these districts as a whole is a result of a generalisation across a chasm of difference. Further, Madhya Pradesh does not have a systematic railway network connecting important centres because it was part of two different historical units—princely states and British India. The railway was established by the British in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It followed either networks of commerce or places of military importance. Consequently, many districts in MP are still off the railway grid entirely, making commerce and travel within the state very difficult.<sup>22</sup>

While preparing for fieldwork amongst farmers in rural MP, I also realised it was one of the most under-studied parts of India. There were umpteen ethnographic monographs and economic studies on agriculture in Punjab, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. The existing ethnographic research on rural Madhya Pradesh consisted of an ethnography of a village in Dewas district conducted in the 1950s by Adrian Mayer (1960), whose

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<sup>22</sup> The total population of the state in 2001 was 60 million. The literacy level was 65% (female literacy was 50%). See [www.mpinfo.org/mpinfonew/english/factfile/mp.asp](http://www.mpinfo.org/mpinfonew/english/factfile/mp.asp) for a compilation based on the 2001 Census of India. According to government estimates in 2004-05, 38.3% of people in the state lived below the poverty line, which was calculated at a consumption of Rs. 425 per person per month (PIB 2007).

main focus was on caste and kinship, and two monographs on adivasis in the western and eastern parts of the state (Baviskar 1995, Sundar 1997). Historical research on Malwa focused on the opium trade during colonial times (Farooqui 1998) and on the competing narratives of conquest and transformation of the region by the Marathas, the Rajputs and the British during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sinh 1936, Srivastava 1966, Srinivasulu 1996). Socioeconomic research on the yellow revolution was limited to studies by economists, such as those conducted by the Jabalpur Agricultural University in Sehore or the National Research Centre for Soyabean in Indore. Their main concern was a cost-benefit analysis of cultivation of soyabean and whether it remained a profitable crop for farmers after 30 years of its introduction (Badal et al. 2000). There was no analysis of the social, political, and cultural transformations associated with and taking place alongside the introduction of soyabean cultivation, nor was there any recent study of ordinary farmers in the state and how they saw such transformations over the last forty years. This ethnographic research is an attempt to contribute towards filling this gap.

I had planned to move quickly to a village and start my detailed ethnographic research in early 2006 but I had been unsuccessful and my stay in Indore had now extended to more than two months. By this time, I was frustrated with not being able to find a village and by the negative responses of farmers and traders towards my requests for follow-up interviews. I could sense that my being a woman had caused some consternation but I could not understand the reason for it. During my earlier research in Haryana, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh, I had always travelled alone and had never faced difficulties being a woman. In fact, on the contrary, many people had trusted me

more, let me into their homes, and I had obtained access to interview women and other family members which a male researcher would have found difficult.

It was a fortuitous meeting with Karan Singh Pawar, the erstwhile Raja of Dhar, which finally ended my quest. His uncle was the last ruler of the Dhar principality before it was annexed to the Indian union in 1947. The district of Dhar is described as one of the most “backward” districts of Madhya Pradesh, with an adivasi (tribal) population of 54.5%, scheduled caste population of 6.5%,<sup>23</sup> and literacy rates are less than 53% (Census of India 2001a). The northern third of the district falls in the fertile Malwa plateau while the southern two-third falls in the Vindhya mountains. Two main rivers of MP, the Mahi and the Chambal originate here. The mountains are also home to one of the most beautiful historical sites in MP, Mandu, famous for the tragic love story of Rani Roopmati and Baz Bahadur in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> The lower boundary of Dhar runs along the Narmada river, and it is home to a number of oustees from the Sardar Sarovar dam. Villages dotting the mountains are inhabited mostly by adivasis whereas villages on the plateau have a mix of castes including many adivasis, Rajputs from Rajasthan, and Patidars from Gujarat.

When I first arrived in Dhar in April 2006, the dry, empty landscape on both sides, dotted with faded yellowing houses and broken wire fencing, looked tired and old in the devastating heat of summer. A few old jeeps dotted the highway which was too narrow for two buses to pass each other without one getting off the metalled section.

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<sup>23</sup> Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Backward Caste and Upper Caste are categories under the Indian constitution which gives reservations in government jobs and educational institutions to backward caste, scheduled caste, and scheduled tribe groups. Scheduled caste (SC) groups are the lower castes also known as *dalits* or *harijans*. Scheduled tribes are tribals or adivasis who are also considered to be lower caste. Backward caste groups are considered to be the lowest level of upper castes.

<sup>24</sup> The ruler of Mandu, Baz Bahadur was defeated by the advancing Mughal army in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and Roopmati took poison and died to avoid capture.

Dhar district is off the railway grid; there is no industry, and no business, except agriculture.<sup>25</sup> When the harvest is good, clothes shops, utensil and *kirana* [sundry] shops, and other local businesses do well. In years of drought, businesses fail. The crumbling infrastructure of the town of Dhar, including the constantly pot-holed roads, the lack of drainage and continuous flooding in the rainy season, the extreme water shortage during the summer months, are typical of many other towns in MP.

Karan Singh Pawar was in his early fifties and had studied at boarding school in Dehradun and completed his college from Delhi University. He came back to Dhar in the late 80s when his father suddenly passed away to take care of the family's agricultural business and farms. He started his political career standing for elections to the post of an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly of MP state) in 1993 from Dhar under a Congress party ticket. He lost then, but in 1998 he won and became the MLA for five years. He lost again in 2003. He had studied law after which he had also completed a Ph.D. in agriculture. He immediately understood what had been going on with my interactions with farmers and traders. To my surprise, he suggested that I needed to hire a male research assistant. He explained to me, "The research assistant is not to help you in your work. You probably do not need help on that front. But it is to make you socially acceptable. People will feel more comfortable talking to you. And you will be safe."

I did not realise that I had been lacking social respectability all this while. But then it finally made sense to me. In all my past research, I had travelled to several villages in a region and interviewed villagers who were connected to village internet centres in

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<sup>25</sup> Pithampur, the Special Economic Zone in Dhar district privately manages its own roads, electricity and other infrastructure. It functions more as a satellite for the city of Indore which is 20 km away rather than as a part of the district of Dhar (see chapter four).

some way. I was always introduced by representatives of the local organisation which had set up those centres and the consent of the local organisation's managers was critical in obtaining cooperation. Further, most people I interviewed had, usually, already been interviewed in the past and knew what to expect. In contrast, in my dissertation research, although I wanted to study the yellow revolution and the *eChoupals*, I wanted to do it from the perspective of people living in a single village. I also intended to live in the village and conduct fieldwork for over a year. Although I was visiting farmers with an introduction from research scientists in Indore, they found my long term research plans to be alien to the usual method of research associated with surveys and questionnaires. They could not understand why I needed to spend one year when they could tell me all I needed to know in an hour's time. If only I had brought along a questionnaire of everything I wanted to know, they would help me answer it and I would be on my way. My unstructured interviews seemed too casual and directionless to them, and I suspect, they refused follow-up interviews thinking that I was not serious enough about my research to provide them with a detailed questionnaire.

But more importantly, I was a married woman travelling alone and meeting with male farmers inside their homes in a region where women could never ever think of travelling alone anywhere. Both married and unmarried women did not even come to the front part of the house to serve tea and water to guests, in contrast to what I had seen happen during my research in other parts of rural India. Here the task was performed by young boys instead. Even though I had an introduction from the agricultural institutes, these farmers were always taken aback to see me all alone visiting their village for the

first time.<sup>26</sup> For the first time during my six years of conducting research in rural India, being a woman researcher (and recently married) had become a liability.

After reaching several dead ends in trying to find a suitable village to study, my meeting with Karan Singh Pawar turned things around. He found a “suitable” research assistant for me and also suggested that I live in the town of Dhar rather than in the village. Although initially I resisted, over time I realised that commuting to the village everyday provided an independence to me that I would not have had otherwise. In a small village like Ranipura, there was only one house with enough space for me to stay without causing discomfort to the occupants and to myself. It was the only pacca house in the village and belonged to the richest farmer who was also the unofficial headman. By not staying there I had more flexibility in my movements in the village. Although I did lose out on intimate details about villagers’ lives and the kind of gossip and social interaction that took place in the few hours after sunset, I think I benefited more in return by obtaining the trust of marginalised groups within the village, especially adivasis and lower castes. They treated me as an outsider rather than linking me to the rich farmer or other upper caste farmers in the village. I believe that this made them more open in sharing information with me about their relationships with upper caste farmers in the village.

Karan Singh Pawar helped me find paying guest accommodation in the town of Dhar and introduced me to my research assistant, Mr. Sunil Bhosle. He was a 40-year-old

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<sup>26</sup> I was also meeting male traders in local market yards where most women never ventured alone for any purpose. The only women present there were those who had been hired by traders to work in small groups to clean the soyabean and wheat of mud particles and other debris. Many traders refused to discuss details with me in the market yard and show me the auction since it was a crowded place full of men jostling with each other.



government clerk from the Water Resources Department of Dhar. According to Pawar he could do clerical work and was dependable—making him an ideal source of support. His connection to Pawar was that he was from the same caste [*samaj*], a Maratha Rajput. His wife was a school teacher in a private school in Dhar and he had a three-year old daughter. I was apprehensive about working with him in the beginning. But in the end, if there is one thing that turned my research around, it was the presence of Bhosleji with me. With a keen eye and ear for politics in every single interaction, he would never tire to regale me with stories of the politics of Ranipura village, of Dhar district, of Madhya Pradesh and even of Delhi! He smoothed over initial interactions with people and encouraged me to start going to the interiors of the house to talk directly with women, while he spoke to the men. He guided me on questions of propriety and giving proper respect to the various people we met. He saved me from embarrassment several times, especially once when all women in the village would not be eating or drinking anything all day, and keeping a fast for the long life of their husbands. Before we left for the village, he said, “Madam you eat everything now but in the village, it will be better if you don’t ask or accept offers of tea. People will judge you badly.” Although I was annoyed initially, since I did not follow such rituals personally, I appreciated later on that his intentions were always good. His presence finally made me socially respectable!

This research is richer and more animated because of him and my other assistant, Jafar Khan, who drove us around Dhar district in his run-down jeep. Jafar bhai, as we called him, was in his late twenties and had just got married a few months before he joined us. He used to work as a driver for a local travel agency but decided to purchase a second-hand jeep and become the owner-driver himself. He was finding it difficult to pay

back the loan for his jeep which he had purchased through the Prime Ministers' Employment Scheme (PMRY)—his loan account was in the bank where my landlady in Dhar worked. I needed a mode of transport during the rainy season, which was the season of soyabean and she arranged for him to work with me. By the end of my fieldwork, Jafar bhai and Bhosleji had conducted an ethnographic survey in the village, photocopied reams of paper from the Soyabean Processors' Association in Indore, followed farmers from Ranipura around the Dhar market yard, and spent countless hours with me writing field notes and interview discussions. They became a fixture at village events and helped me to learn a great deal about the underbelly of the village than I could have done myself. We made a curious trio. A female student from America, whose husband lived in Delhi but hailed from Orissa, and who professed to be ignorant about her caste; an upper caste Rajput Maratha who was acutely interested in politics, and a Muslim driver who had grown up in a locality of Dhar inhabited mostly by Hindu families and who ended up befriending more people in Ranipura than either of us.

### **Ranipura and the Yellow Revolution**

Ranipura was the first village where Bhosleji and I were taken by Baghelji, a Rural Agricultural Extension Officer of Jhumki block in Dhar district. I met him in the Block Development Office where I was sent by Karan Singh Pawar to consult with local officials to choose a village. Baghelji had been working in Ranipura since 1995 and said that it was one of those few villages where people were most receptive to government schemes and to outsiders. You will like this village, madam, he said. And he was right.

Ranipura is located at the edge of the Malwa plateau, about 16 km from the town of Dhar, off the main highway. It is not one of the prosperous Malwa villages with a

hundred feet deep black soil where Patidar and Rajput farmers farm tens of hectares with tractors and harvesters running up and down the countryside. Ranipura is poor. With 565 inhabitants, it is an average sized village for the state of Madhya Pradesh. It comprises of 98 households. It has 21 upper caste Rajput families, 24 backward caste<sup>27</sup> Jat and Maru families, 49 adivasi families (scheduled tribes) and four *balais* (dalits or scheduled castes) who are the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Out of 98 households, small and marginal cultivators constituted 73 households and they farmed about 90 hectares or 36% percent of the total cultivable area in the village.<sup>28</sup> The remaining 26 households farmed 74% of the village land. Amongst the small and marginal cultivators, 10 households had one or two members holding a government job to supplement the income from agriculture. According to the official Below Poverty Line (BPL) list, in 1998, 40 families of Ranipura were listed as BPL whereas in 2003, this was revised to 18. However, if one pegged the poverty level at 1\$ a day per person, then at least 60 households would count as poor.

The lone *pacca* house in the village belonged to Suraj Jat, the largest landowner and the village Patel,<sup>29</sup> but it was the Rajput families who held sway in village affairs and it was Rajput men who dominated the conversation during my first visit sitting at the Ram temple. I introduced myself as a student from the United States of America who had come to study the changes that had taken place in Malwa with the introduction of soyabean cultivation. Immediately, I was asked, how did you come to Ranipura? Bhosleji

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<sup>27</sup> Backward caste is a category under the Indian constitution to categorize certain sections of society that are deemed to be economically poorer and with reduced opportunities for social uplift.

<sup>28</sup> All households of the Rajputs (except one), fell under the small and marginal farmer category, cultivating 2 hectares or less. All adivasi and *balai* families also cultivated 2 hectares or less (see chapter four for details).

<sup>29</sup> Patel is a hereditary title from colonial times. The Patel was appointed by the Raja of Dhar and his responsibility was to represent the village at the court in Dhar and be the tax collector. Although Ranipura is not a panchayat (it comes under the Rangwasa panchayat) and does not have its own *sarpanch* [headman], the Patel can be considered to be the village headman.

elaborated that madam first came to Indore and from there she was directed to Karan Singh Pawar in Dhar who then sent her to the Block Development Office in Jhumki, from where Baghelji brought us to Ranipura. I told them that I wanted to understand their point of view as opposed to the versions of the scientists and policy makers in Indore and Bhopal.

The villagers of Ranipura accepted me because of three reasons—the introduction through Karan Singh Pawar who was well-known to them and who had got a section of the road built in the village through his MLA funds; the direct meeting arranged by Baghelji who had been working in the village for more than 10 years and who was in good terms with the Rajputs in the village who were from his caste; and the presence of Bhosleji as an intermediary. These links gave me social respectability as well as placed me as an outsider in the minds of villagers who was here to learn about them and their lives. At the same time, I am Indian and Hindu and villagers also expected me to behave according to certain cultural practices that they took to be universally applicable to Hindus. They learnt that I was a married woman but did not see me wearing any symbols marking me as such. They also asked me about my caste since my last name, Kumar, signified no caste at all, and I always answered that I did not know what it was. I told them that I had grown up in Bombay, did high school in Japan, and then college in the United States and no one had ever asked me about my caste. I simply did not know. Both these things created instability in villagers' minds as to how to categorize me within their social and cultural framework. I was aware of how the markers of marriage and caste would define me in particular ways in the minds of villagers and create expectations in their mind about my behaviour. It would also influence their behaviour towards me

depending upon where they perceived themselves to be in relation to me in the social hierarchy. But I had not lived in India for nearly 10 out of the 12 years prior to starting this research and neither of these markers had been significant in my own definition of my identity. I wanted to be known as a student from the United States, whose parents lived in China and whose husband lived in Delhi—partly to reduce people’s expectations that I conform to their perceptions of me as married Hindu woman and partly to generate a productive space of instability where I could talk to them about these issues once we got to know each other better. Although Bhosleji and Jafar bhai suggested several times that I simply “make up” a caste and tell people so they can categorize me easily, I resisted. Finally Bhosleji took to telling everyone we met that my husband was from Orissa and he was a Patnaik, which is the same last name as the current chief minister of the state. Hence, I was a Patnaik. Since most people were not aware of that last name and were unable to quickly place it along a familiar hierarchy,<sup>30</sup> such a label prevented closure to the question while also allowing people to categorize me when introducing me to others.

As I started my research through unstructured interviews, constructing genealogies and participant observation, villagers were soon disconcerted by the lack of questionnaires. They had seen many government schemes pass through their village<sup>31</sup> and had answered innumerable government surveys on health, education, family planning, population, etc., that they now expected any research to take the form of a survey, with

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<sup>30</sup> Although caste in India refers to the four main categories of *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*, most people understand caste through their *jati*, a much smaller social grouping that is usually specific to a region. Hence, people in Madhya Pradesh would not be able to quickly identify and hierarchically categorize the *jatis* of people living in Orissa and vice versa (cf. Bayly 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Ranipura’s direct link to government schemes started in 1984 when it was selected as one of the earliest villages to be adopted by the national fertiliser company, IFFCO, to promote the use of fertiliser in agriculture.

multiple choice answers. Open ended questions drew a blank look until Bhosleji tried to reframe them as “survey” questions and people started responding. Usually such surveys and schemes positioned people as “receivers” and the surveyors and scheme implementers as “givers”—whether of knowledge or objects. Initially many villagers would ask me at the end of an interview whether I had any new knowledge about soyabean that I was here to share with them. Others enquired whether I had brought with me something to handout to everyone—new seeds, pesticide sachets, or something else. When Bhosleji and I told them this is “*padhai*” [study] and I was here to learn from them, not teach them or give them anything, many refused to come back and talk to me again. I had been introduced through Baghelji, the RAEO whose job it was to bring new information and handouts to villagers and it was natural on their part to expect something from me.

Upon meeting us for the first time, farmers apprehensively asked Bhosleji if I was working for some multinational company or the government and what I planned to do with all the information. I told them that this was research for my Ph.D. and that I would write a book in the end. I was here to ask for their help in this task and unfortunately, did not have anything to give in return. In effect, this research would help me obtain a degree and serve my personal ends rather than help anyone directly in Ranipura. It was the most accurate representation of my project I could give to people because I did not want them to have expectations that my work would directly or indirectly help (or hurt) them in any way. Over time, some of the people in Ranipura who had worked in government jobs understood this as a “tour” that many government employees are sent on to get first-hand knowledge about a place. They explained to others in the village that I was doing this for

improving my chances of better employment in the future. People finally started opening up to me when I began handing out colour photographs of them which I had taken during my visits. Then the flood gates opened and women, men, children, everyone started inviting me to their homes to take their picture. When I realized my value had increased only because of my camera, I felt hurt; until I figured out that it provided an excellent excuse to get to know new people in Ranipura.

The summer of 2006, when I started fieldwork in Ranipura, saw one of the severest water shortages in the village. The handpumps were dry and the pond was empty. Water had to be brought in drums from tubewells more than a kilometre or two away. The village was without electricity for 12-14 hours a day and most households used kerosene lamps for light. With about 25 households or one-fourth of the village having built latrines, a majority of villagers defecated in the open fields. Ranipura had no cement or tar road to connect it with the main highway or with fields nearby. During the rainy season that followed, motorcycles and bullock carts could not easily traverse outside the village. Everything had to be carried on the head—water pots and jerrycans, fertiliser bags, green fodder for the animals, sickles, and hoes. Fifty percent of the village residents were adivasis or tribals who have historically been amongst the poorest and most marginalised groups in India. Leaky roofs, broken charpoys, and mud huts lined their area of the village and one could get to it only by wading through 6 inches of mud. Taking notes in the light of a kerosene lamp, I would recall the well-maintained roads and the brightly lit up India Gate every evening in the city of New Delhi, and wonder, were we living in the same country?

People's footsteps created paths through wet muddy fields, and every path was cut off with overflowing rain water from the fields. After the initial plowing and sowing, tractors came back to their sheds in the village and sat there until harvest, especially in 2006 when it rained so hard and never stopped. Despite so much rain every summer there was a severe drinking water shortage in Ranipura—it took me a long time to understand that the technological complex which constituted the yellow revolution had an integral role to play in making water excess and scarce at the same time.

But the yellow revolution was supposed to be a story about development. It was described as the crop that brought double cropping to Malwa, that created rising incomes by linking farmers to a global cash economy, and that brought monetary prosperity. Ranipura had 8 tractors, 5 diesel threshers, about 80 working tubewells with motors, 27 motorcycles, 21 mobile phones (two owned by adivasis), 15 cable television dish antennas and 20 colour televisions in 2006. But this consumerism rested uneasily against a visual impact of poverty that was overwhelming. Mud houses with thatch or tin roofs, poorly fed and generally unkempt children, women still washing clothes at the pond and carrying water to their houses in pots on their heads, a run-down government school, muddy water flowing around the houses of adivasis and around the village school, and general low level of education amongst women and adivasis—how could this contrast be explained?

Initially, I surmised that perhaps Ranipura's soil is not very productive and the farmers are not able to earn enough. But by 2008, there were 14 tractors in the village, nearly 60 mobile phones, several new motorcycles and almost 80 new tubewells had been dug, out of which barely 10 yielded water, at a cost of more than 1 million rupees or



\$20,000. It is only on hindsight that I understood what was missing from the story of the yellow revolution. It was not a lack of emphasis on things beyond the economic, i.e. towards education, health, or infrastructure. It was a failure to recognize the role of power in distributing the monetary benefits accruing from the yellow revolution. Much of the “lack” of transformation or the perpetuation of what I saw as poverty was a result of women and adivasis not having the power to control or appropriate the resources resulting from growing a cash crop like soyabean.

On the other hand, the introduction of soyabean cultivation has helped poor farmers stay on the land for a few more years. Soyabean is a rain-fed crop that can survive across a range of moisture stresses—both excess and scarce. Unlike the green revolution, the growth of soyabean did not depend on tubewell irrigation. Although fertilizers improved the yield, the crop was sturdy enough to survive in less fertile soils. Hence, even poor farmers could grow it and expect some output from the season. As an integral part of the technological complex that has resulted in severe hardship due to water scarcity, soyabean brought some financial prosperity to farmers across Malwa regardless of caste or class.

This research dissects the narratives of development associated with the yellow revolution and the *eChoupals* and questions their teleological and transactional views. At the same time it places alongside them descriptions of alternative arenas of struggle where rural populations are engaged in their own projects of change which are framed around the deeper aspirations of their lives.

## Structure of the Dissertation

The first chapter of this dissertation is a historical overview of the yellow revolution and what kind of development it represented in the minds of various human actors such as government agricultural scientists, private processing company owners, government cooperative society managers, and “good farmers.” Drawing upon these various narratives, I argue that the yellow revolution was a result of contingent circumstances resulting from the coalescing of a wide variety of factors brought together by the actions of human and non-human actors such as characteristics of the soyabean crop, the soil of Malwa, and patterns of rainfall, to name a few. Further, I argue that the yellow revolution was also about making “good farmers” [*acche kisan*] who were connected to research institutes and who valued new technologies and higher productivity. At the same time, these “good farmers,” who belonged to the rural social, economic and political elite of Malwa, used the category to make claims upon the state to provide them with subsidized inputs, new varieties of seeds, and higher prices for their output. In doing so, they further marginalised the claims of poor adivasi farmers to have any right to subsistence from the land.

The second chapter explores the discourse of “information is power” from the perspective of soyabean farmers in Malwa. I argue that projects like the *eChoupals*, which seek to empower farmers by providing them with information on market prices, create a narrowly transactional view of empowerment. This ignores structural constraints related to transport and credit as well as larger processes of disempowerment circumscribing farmers who participate in global soyabean markets. Instead, this research points towards other arenas of struggle within the marketplace that farmers engage in

such as disputes over weighing and measurement at the government-owned market yards and disputes over quality at the *eChoupal* buying centres. The limited emphasis of development projects on empowering farmers by providing information alone draws attention away from these everyday battles that farmers participate in, and which, I argue, should also be taken seriously.

The third chapter shifts emphasis to one of the most marginalised groups in India, the adivasis, who form one-fifth of the population of Madhya Pradesh and more than 50% of the population of Dhar and Ranipura. Most adivasis in Ranipura are farm labourers and this chapter provides a historical overview of their material condition, which has remained unchanged despite a plethora of state interventions such as land reforms and handouts. Further, there has been no sustained political mobilisation by adivasis against upper castes in Malwa, despite years of discrimination, along the lines of similar mobilisations undertaken by dalits (scheduled castes) in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh in the last 20 years. The yellow revolution, I argue, has provided adivasi farm labourers with an opportunity every year at the soyabean harvest to assert themselves in economic relationships with upper caste farmers because of the creation of what I call an “economy of haste.” Recently, in conjunction with the introduction of a central government employment scheme, the annual “economy of haste” has empowered adivasi labourers to seek higher wages in other economic activity unrelated to the harvest as well. This research emphasizes the role of political action by marginalised groups in making claims upon the state to provide for their welfare through measures such as the employment scheme. Unlike development projects where accountability flows towards the donors, political representatives are directly accountable to the people of their

constituency. By disparaging such political activity as corrupt and illegal, the language of development denies marginalised groups an important arena of struggle that they participate in to bring about change in their lives.

The fourth chapter brings into focus those in Ranipura who live in a space of interruptions and who remain invisible in agrarian narratives that focus on farmers and farm labourers alone. A majority of young people, both upper caste and lower caste, cannot hope to make a living from the land they will inherit in the next 10 years or so. Those who are somewhat educated do not want to work as manual labourers, yet they do not possess the skills to do supervisory or managerial jobs. Their experience in places like the industrial township of Pithampur, which is a Special Economic Zone with a plethora of automotive factories, reveals an ambivalence characterised by incapability and loneliness in the urban environment and a desire to return to the quality of life and support system in the village. Further, the monetary benefits resulting from the yellow revolution have bypassed most women in Ranipura, cutting across the caste and class divide. The contrasting visual impact of poverty against consumerism seen in the villages of Malwa is a direct result of the shift to growing a cash crop which can only be converted to value through an intermediary in the market place—an activity that can only be undertaken by men. Development projects, although targeted at disadvantaged groups like women, fail to create the conditions to question the lines of exclusion that frame rural society. This research argues that cultural projects such as *Swadhyay* provide an alternative arena of struggle for some upper caste women and semi-educated young adivasi men to overcome discrimination and exercise agency in bringing to fruition the desires and aspirations in their lives. Only by recovering and foregrounding the agency of

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rural people in these alternative arenas of engagement with structures of power, can the language and practice of development be enriched and we can move towards thinking ethically about the future of rural society.

Richa Kumar

## **Chapter One**

### **Making “Good Farmers”: Development and the Yellow Revolution in Malwa**

The “yellow revolution” in Malwa in western Madhya Pradesh (MP), which refers to the shift to soyabean farming in the region, was proclaimed post-facto as a development intervention by the state. This chapter explores multiple, often competing, visions of development that are embodied in the “yellow revolution” from the perspective of a variety of human actors associated with it. This includes government agricultural scientists, private processing company owners, oilseed cooperative managers, and well-to-do farmers. I argue that whereas state and market narratives about the yellow revolution proclaim development to be a teleological and evolutionary process of change, narratives of farmers in Malwa do not see change in this way. I recover the role of a number of other actors, both human and non-human, in bringing about agrarian change, which has included positive as well as negative effects over the course of the last forty years.

This research argues that the language of development is inadequate to explain agrarian change. Instead of using “development,” farmers describe positive change as “prosperity” and “plenty,” words that embody within them the recognition that agricultural change is always contingent upon the coalescing together of various factors, many of which are not in farmers’ hands. Unlike development, which has a moral connotation of permanently moving away from a perceived backwardness (Pigg 1992), prosperity denotes a state which may not be everlasting at all. Falling on hard times after

a time of prosperity does not necessarily have a moral implication about a person or a region—it invites investigation into multiple causes for such a decline while accepting that decline is as much a part of change as prosperity (see Ferguson 1999).

By categorizing change in the language of development the postcolonial state is able to claim a much greater role in social transformation and justify its existence as the provider of development (Bose 1997, Ludden 1992). It also reinforces the authority of powerful agents such as state and market actors to appropriate the language of development and define its parameters either as the health of the poor or the health of the economy, to the exclusion of all other narratives.

One such narrative defined by the postcolonial state through the yellow revolution is that of the “good farmer” [*acche kisan*], through which farmers are evaluated solely on their ability to produce more and at higher levels of productivity. This is similar to the triumphant narrative of the green revolution in India, which linked farmers to the development of the nation by emphasizing their contribution towards making India self-sufficient in food grains. This legitimized the shifting of resources to farmers through a package of high-yielding seeds, subsidized electricity, and cheap fertilizer. Likewise, making “good farmers” through the yellow revolution in Madhya Pradesh meant a legitimate shifting of resources towards farmers who fulfilled the obligations of higher production and productivity to bring about development. At the same time, through the mechanisms of democratic politics, farmers have been able to influence the state to continue providing them with support such as cheap fertilizer and subsidized electricity despite growing state budget deficits and losses to state-owned fertilizer and electricity



companies (Rudolph et al. 1987, Gupta 1998, Frankel 2005).<sup>1</sup> In fact, farmers have been successful in obtaining benefits even during the last 20 years after the shift towards liberalization from 1991 onwards. During the assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh in 2008, the state government promised farmers, waivers on loans and interest payments, electricity bill default waivers, and a 100-rupee per quintal bonus in the procurement price of wheat.

Partha Chatterjee (2004, 2008a) has characterized these claims of farmers as a legitimate activity of political society that should not be denigrated as illegal or corrupt, as is done by development agencies like the World Bank which seek to privatize electricity provision and reduce subsidies to farmers in the name of efficiency. He considers the influx of capital, especially the growth of agribusiness, as a serious threat to the viability of farmers in India. In the face of the looming threat of urban corporate capital, Chatterjee argues that poor farmers have no other option for survival except by making these claims (2008a: 61). However, Chatterjee's analysis homogenizes farmers into a single class of people, undivided by caste, landholding, or other axes of stratification.

The farmers who have benefited from state subsidies in agriculture are the medium and large farmers who could afford to purchase fertilizer for their fields and who had legal title to their land to pledge against state-subsidized loans (Rudolph et al. 1987, Varshney 1995). In Malwa, these were the Patidar, Rajput, Jat, and Maratha farmers who had immigrated to the region in the last 150-200 years. They had pushed out poor adivasi farmers into the Vindhya mountains and taken over the fertile lands the latter had farmed

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<sup>1</sup> I would add that these claims have been fulfilled by diverting money away from areas such as education and rural health, which have a direct positive impact on the poorest of the rural population.

previously. These upper caste farmers have been able to use the language of rights and make successful claims upon the state by linking the category of “good farmers” with national development. At the same time, by arguing that only those who can become “good farmers” have a right to remain on the land, they have used this language to deny poor, lower caste and adivasi farmers to even have a right to subsistence from the land. By valorizing their claims upon the state as a legitimate action of political society, Chatterjee’s framework ends up reinforcing the power of those who are already economically and politically powerful and further marginalizing the poor and the weak.

When agrarian change is normatively defined as making “good farmers” and the result is labeled as development, it forecloses any opening for alternate imaginings of change. It becomes a hegemonic language that obscures power relationships and inequalities that stratify agrarian society and which are constantly at work to create variations in farm practices and differences amongst farmers. Evaluating farmers on the basis of narrow definitions of development creates caricatures out of the actual lived circumstances of people and reinforces stereotypes about the poor and the lower caste. It also creates conditions whereby those who are deemed as unfit or unable to become “good farmers” are immediately considered to be unfit to continue farming altogether. Making “good farmers,” thus, becomes a legitimate means to push the poor and marginalized off the land in the name of development.

### **Competing Visions of Development**

Soyabean was a marginal crop grown in hill tracts in various parts of the country until its renaissance in the 1960s when Indian government agricultural scientists in collaboration with scientists from United States’ land grant institutions developed

varieties suited to conditions in the Indian plains. Originally these scientists expected soyabean to contribute to India's development by providing a cheap source of protein for the masses as a nutritional supplement to the carbohydrates made available by the green revolution. However, the subsequent adoption of soyabean cultivation took place only when private oilseed processors in Malwa recognized the international market demand for deoiled cake (soyabean meal) as cattle feed. They argued that soyabean was critical for India's development by providing scarce foreign exchange for industrial expansion. Subsequently, the cooperative oil federation that was started by the government to promote self-sufficiency in edible oils, further promoted soyabean cultivation and ultimately popularized the crop. Over time then, the definition of development shifted from the health of the poor measured in nutritional terms to the health of the nation measured in economic terms. Yet, both these definitions characterized development as a teleological narrative of progress and positive change and enhanced the role of state and market actors in being the agents of development.

However, I argue that the language of development is inadequate to explain this kind of agrarian change, which is the unintended result of the imbrication of a variety of forces stemming from a myriad set of human and non-human actors (Bijker 1992, Latour 1992, Mitchell 2002, Caliskan 2007, Gidwani 2008). I bring out the role of various other human actors such as farmers and agricultural scientists, as well as that of non-human actors such as the characteristics of the soil and the geology of Malwa, that play important roles in shaping the yellow revolution. Further, I show that agrarian change in Malwa has brought about material prosperity but also resulted in an ecological crisis. The economic and statistical measures which are typically used to describe the yellow

revolution as development, fail to capture the multiple actors involved in the story and the multiple directions of movement that inhabit such transformations.

The value-laden terminology of *vikas* [development] conveys a sense of linear movement—a progression from backward to forward, traditional to modern, denigrating what came before. Once change is defined as development, it is assumed to be a permanent, one-way, linear shift. In contrast, farmers use words like “*khushhali*” or “*sampannata*”, meaning prosperity, plenty, or having resources at one’s disposal, to describe positive aspects of agrarian change that has come about with the introduction of soyabean cultivation. Unlike the normative sense of devaluation inherent in *vikas*, *khushhali* describes change as a material state which is dependent upon the unstable coalescing of a variety of factors. In a dryland region like Malwa that depends on the annual monsoon for sustenance, farmers are deeply aware that a year of failed rains is always on the horizon. Rather than using development, their expressions of agrarian change communicate a sense of impermanence, an expectation that prosperity may not last forever, that decline is as much a part of change as is prosperity.

### **Protein as Development**

Dr. P.S. Bhatnagar gave me my first history lesson on the introduction of soyabean to India.<sup>2</sup> He is the ex-Director and Founder of the National Research Centre for Soyabean in Indore, and an internationally renowned scientist. Although now retired from the government, he provides consultancy services to multinational companies (MNCs) like ITC-IBD (India’s largest agribusiness) and is a revered figure in the world

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<sup>2</sup> The following section is based on interviews with Dr. P.S. Bhatnagar, ex-Director of the National Research Centre for Soyabean, Indore, on January 31, 2006 and February 28, 2006.

of soyabean. “Good farmers” constantly call him up for advice and he stays in touch with colleagues both in the agricultural university system and at the Soyabean Processors Association. His house, located on the outskirts of Indore near the Agricultural College, was being renovated when I first went to meet him. One room had been converted to a small office with a library of soyabean related books and papers. He spent several hours discussing my project with me.

He described soyabean as an excellent and cheap source of protein and recalled that initially scientists tried to introduce it in India to help alleviate malnutrition in India. Although some varieties had been grown in the hill tracts of the country for more than 1000 years and research on soyabean was undertaken in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by colonial and Indian scientists, there was no push towards large scale cultivation of the crop (Tiwari et al. 1999, Chauhan and Joshi 2005). In the 1960s, the Indian agricultural university system was established along the lines of the US Land Grant Universities and there followed a period of intellectual exchange between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1960s, under USAID funding, Drs. Earl Leng, Ed Bay, W.D. Buddemeier, and Richard Matsura were sent as advisors to Pant Nagar Agricultural University in the state of Uttar Pradesh and Jabalpur Agricultural University (JNKVV) in Madhya Pradesh. “Leng, Matsura and Bay did not come as soyabean experts. They came as a team of agronomists, entomologists etc. The agreement was that USAID would fund an advising committee to

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<sup>3</sup> The replication of the land grant system of agricultural and technical universities of the United States in India started with an agreement signed between the two countries in 1947. The University of Illinois collaborated with Uttar Pradesh Agricultural University, established in 1960 in the hill town of Pant Nagar and with the Jawahar Lal Nehru Krishi Vishwa Vidyalaya (JNKVV) established in 1964 in the town of Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh (Shurtleff and Aoyagi 2007a and *Interview with Dr. P.S. Bhatnagar*, Feb 28, 2006).

come to India. The purpose of the team was to develop teaching faculty and help in research.”

But the University of Illinois, from where these scientists came, had been the hub of soyabean research in the US since the 1920s and the state of Illinois had been America’s leading soyabean producer since 1924 (Shurtleff and Aoyogi 2007b). The scientists’ research was related to soyabean and they were aware of its rich protein content. At that time, the green revolution was just taking off and awareness of India’s protein gap was increasing. A study estimated that 80% of India’s young children suffered from various degrees of protein malnutrition (Shurtleff and Aoyogi 2007a). “Matsura,” recalls Prof. Bhatnagar, “was a man of *missionary spirit*. He was Japanese American. He felt if soyabean is popularized, it will help overcome malnutrition in society.” The UIUC team brought the first soya material to India in 1965 with the idea of adapting US varieties to Indian conditions. “They wanted to try something new,” said Prof. Bhatnagar. “They probably didn’t know that a black seeded variety of soyabean had been grown for centuries in hill regions of India.” Known as *kali tuur* or *bhatmaas*, it was not a commercial crop but was used to make a healthy black soup.<sup>4</sup>

In 1965-66 the first trial of yellow seeded soyabean varieties from the US—Bragg, Clarke, Lee and others—was conducted at Pant Nagar and then at JNKVV. Once it was realized that agronomically soyabean can be grown,<sup>5</sup> the All India Coordinated

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<sup>4</sup> Almost every government agricultural scientist I interviewed emphasized the long durree of soyabean on the Indian subcontinent in an effort to resurrect the role of the Indian nation in its own development and to play down the role of the United States in providing scientists and soyabean strains. Ultimately, none of the American bred strains worked in Indian conditions and the first popular variety, Punjab-1, was bred from kalituur and a Chinese variety (See Tiwari et al. 1999).

<sup>5</sup> “Bragg at Pantnagar reached 3,593 kg/ha (53.3 bu/a), much better than the Illinois state average of 1,873 kg/ha (27.8 bu/a). Two other varieties yielded near 3,000 kg/ha (43.5 bu/a). Equally impressive was the fact

Project on Soyabean was started in 1967.<sup>6</sup> In 1969, Prof. Bhatnagar took over as project coordinator. Much effort was put into researching new varieties, increasing yields, and most important, trying to popularize soyabean as a food to create a market for the crop. Compared to other pulses, soyabean has very high percentage of protein and well-balanced amino acids.<sup>7</sup> Products like soy milk, soy paneer (tofu), soy yogurt, soy nuggets (texturised vegetable protein), soy baby foods, etc. were all experimented with and several recipe books were published to inform consumers of possible uses of soy foods in Indian cooking. But the “Indian man is rigid in his eating habits,” lamented Prof. Bhatnagar.

When marketing efforts failed, questions were, therefore, raised regarding the economic feasibility of soyabean. Prof. Bhatnagar had a hard time convincing his own wife to use it—it had a beany flavour and an unpleasant after taste. Farmers grew it but couldn’t dispose of it. They tried to feed it to cattle but the animals suffered from diarrhea because it cannot be fed to livestock without processing. “The set back was very strong and farmers burnt their fingers,” he continued. “Virtually,” then “soyabean was dumped in manure pits.”

In 1971 the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) decided to stop the All India Coordinated Project on Soyabean. Prof. Bhatnagar went to Dr. O.P. Gautam,

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that the soyabeans took only 97 to 111 days to maturity, as compared with 134-149 days in the southern USA and Brazil” (Shurtleff and Aoyagi 2007a).

<sup>6</sup> This was in the Division of Plant Introduction in the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in Delhi whose Head was Dr. Harbhajan Singh. But he passed away so the project shifted to Pant Nagar under agronomist Dr. M.C. Saxena in 1968. He too left the country to go to ICARDA in Syria. Then Prof. Bhatnagar took over.

<sup>7</sup> Prof. Bhatnagar explains: Per hectare production of protein is much higher in soyabean than any other crop. Cost of cultivation compared to other pulses is much less. So cost per unit of protein is much less. Second, quality of protein is much better because it has lysine which is helpful for growing children. There is very little lysine in wheat and rice. Sulphur containing amino acids are less in soyabean and more in cereals (See Chauhan et al. 1988: 43 and Chauhan and Joshi, 2005).

Director General of ICAR and argued for four hours to allow the scientists one more chance to create some marketing outlet for the crop. I asked Prof. Bhatnagar how he was personally affected when the soyabean project failed. He said, “I was confident that the market will develop. I was not convinced that it won’t take off as a food crop. I thought it would be accepted. But fortunately the first processing plant was started at Indore by Mahadev Shahara, an oil miller and trader.” I asked him, how did that happen? “It was his foresight.” By 1970, farmers had taken up yellow soyabean and although there was no market, they had started getting it to traders. “Perhaps Shahara came to know about DOC (deoiled cake). He is a *baniya*, a trader, so he may have known.... He is a very shrewd businessman.” At this point in our conversation, Prof. Bhatnagar called up Kailash Shahara, the son of Mahadev Shahara, to ask exactly how and why did he start processing soyabean.

### **Dollars as Development**

Kailash Shahara is today, head of the largest soyabean processing company in India—Ruchi Soya. He sits on one of the top floors of Mahakosh House, Ruchi’s own building in the heart of Indore city. I waited almost an hour before I was called in for an interview with him. Mr. Shahara is more than 70 years old, his white skin sagging slightly across his face contrasting with his shock of dyed black hair. His hand shook as he wrote and quivered as he drank coconut water. He is on the Board of numerous business and government organizations. Apart from running the Ruchi empire, which has increasingly shifted to refining imported crude palm oil in port-based processing plants



and selling edible oil in India, he is the Director of the National Board of Trade, the only open outcry<sup>8</sup> soyabean oil futures exchange in the country.

He described how he brought soyabean to Madhya Pradesh:

“Traditionally our firm has been involved in commodities, in agri-processing. ...From the days of my father, we used to have a ginning and oil pressing mill. In the north [Uttar Pradesh]—Nainital, Bareilly—we had relations so we used to go there. [Soya] is a Himalayan crop. ...It is known as *Bhatt*...the black variety was most popular there. We brought the seed to Madhya Pradesh and did agricultural extension with it. ...After visiting America we realized, we had a vision that it can be a plains crop also. Initially there was a belief [*maanyata*] that it is a hill crop only. When we saw it in other countries of the world, then we felt that this crop can develop in other parts of the country also. So this is how soyabean came to Madhya Pradesh. This is how we had a pioneering role in terms of identifying the crop which could be taken as a plains crop and introducing the crop for developing utilisation of the crop [learning the oil extraction process and using soy meal as cattle feed] and making it a commercial proposition in the interest of farmers and all related sectors of society.”

In my earlier meeting with Prof. Bhatnagar, he had summarized the phone conversation with Kailash Shahara regarding this topic. Mr. Shahara had told Dr. Bhatnagar that he discovered black soyabean at Pantnagar, while visiting his parents-in-law there. He brought it to Madhya Pradesh. His son studied in the US and so he used to go to USA and saw deoiled cake (DOC) and its rates in international markets and learnt of its importance. So he started processing soyabean in his existing oil mill to produce and export DOC. There was little emphasis in his account on the oil that could be extracted from the soyabean and none whatsoever on any food uses of the crop.

I remembered the Pantnagar link and I asked Mr. Shahara, “I have interviewed some scientists who did R&D on this in the 1970s in the universities.” He immediately cut me off. “That all came afterwards. These professors used to come here wondering what is this thing? They couldn’t understand it. ...We gave it the nomenclature of *kali*

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<sup>8</sup> Open outcry means a pit trading exchange where traders physically interact and shout out bids as opposed to an online system where traders interact only through computer screens.

*tuur* because it looked like *tuur* (pigeon pea) so that people could easily understand what it was. So all these scientists used to go about talking of *kali tuur*, *kali tuur*. After that like how you people submit a paper and get a PhD, it was a business conducted later on [*woh baad ka dhandha hai*]. They [scientists] are all experts of later on.”

Prof. Bhatnagar disagreed when I recounted this to him. He said *kali tur* or *kali kulti* was a native of Madhya Pradesh and had been grown in the local hills for a long time. In UP it was known as *bhatt* or *bhattmas*. Mahadev Shahara, Kailash’s father, was a trader and he bought it at less than 1 rupee per kg. “He would remove the skin and mix it with *tuur dal* (pigeon pea) [to adulterate it]. The inside was still yellow. This was in 1971-72.”

Ignoring the slight to PhDs, I continued to explore the Pantnagar link in my interview with Kailash Shahara. “How did you get the original strains?” I asked Mr. Shahara. He explained it to me: “Actually, see we used to go to Nainital often as my relatives lived there. My in-laws also lived there. ...My forefathers had farms there. I had interest in farming and Pantnagar University is very good place to know about various development and concept going on. We used to go there. We saw there is something called *bhat*. We got the information that this was going to Tibet, China and America, too. The local name, local nomenclature was *bhat*. So then we thought [*humari dhaarna bani*] that why not we try and experiment it out in the plains and we brought it...and developed its seed....These scientists [*yeh scientist log*] came much later.” Even though he sourced the seed from Pantnagar University, Kailash Shahara did not seem to give importance to the role of the All India Coordinated Project on Soyabean or to the American scientists and their vision for rural development.

The second person to take full credit for introducing soyabean to MP after Shahara was someone I met near the end of my fieldwork in Dhar district. Deepak Suryavanshi owned a palace on the way to Mandu, the historic ruins of the capital of the Parmar dynasty from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He had bought the palace, which was actually built by the English as a guest house, from the last queen of Dhar, Maharani Mrinaline Raje Puar. I spotted the palace during one of my trips to a branch of the Oil Federation in Dhar. It is built in a depression so it is not clearly visible from the road but that ensures all the water from the surrounding areas flows into the aquifers of the palace, which is now a heritage hotel. Suryavanshi grows soyabean, wheat, fruits, vegetables, and has a huge dairy, supplying fresh produce to the kitchens. “I am the pioneer of soyabean in this country,” he stated to me when he learnt about my research. “Don’t you know that I started the first ever soyabean processing plant?!<sup>9</sup>”

I politely smiled at him and asked him to elaborate since I believed that in 1972, it was Kailash Shahara who started soyabean processing. I even mentioned that to him. He started on a tirade against Shahara’s company, Ruchi Soya and the government. But finally he explained that he was the one who first imported the latest equipment in the 1980s to use solvent extraction technology for soyabean processing rather than the expeller technology, which was being used in the mills till then. The Shaharas were already processing other oilseeds and they simply switched to soyabean as the new raw material. Deepak Suryavanshi’s factory, Malwa Proteins, was built exclusively to process soyabean and was located in Dewas district, on the other side of Indore from Dhar.

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<sup>9</sup> Mr. Suryavanshi had purchased the palace, named Jhira Bagh palace (for the water collecting in the depression and providing sustenance for agriculture all year round), in 1990, but he only started taking keen interest in the last few years. He has moved there permanently from Indore and likes to spend his time experimenting with organic farming.

It is ironic that Malwa Proteins and Ruchi Soya were created not to provide nutritious protein-rich food to the population of the country but to facilitate the export of processed soyabean. Soyabean was accepted on the Indian agricultural scene only as a commercial crop and not a food crop, despite all efforts made to create a space for protein enriched foods. Dr. G.S. Kaushal, ex-Director of the Agricultural Department of Madhya Pradesh state government who retired in 2005, recalled that the earlier [in the 1970s] agricultural scientists simply did not think of processing. They were all educated in the United States [through the association with USAID] and there food uses were more important – soya flour, biscuits, soyamilk were quite popular. But in the Indian context, “we exported the protein and left our poor still malnourished.” Prof. Bhatnagar put it more bluntly: “it is ironic that we exported our cheapest source of protein to fatten the cattle of affluent foreign countries.”

The meaning of development shifted from a focus on the health of the poor to the health of the Indian economy. “The Shaharas used to bring dollars and it had a huge value,” stated Prof. Bhatnagar. “Anyone who could bring dollars into the country got huge concessions.” Kailash Shahara quantified the contribution as follows: “With the export of soyameal India obtains 2500 crore rupees [25 billion rupees] worth of foreign exchange today and saves another 2500 crore rupees on its edible oil import bill—two major advantages for India’s economy.” Earning India precious foreign exchange from soyameal and reducing the country’s edible oil import bill through the production of soyabean oil became the important contribution of the soyabean to the nation’s development according to market actors in Malwa.

## Self-sufficiency as Development

There was a third narrative of the yellow revolution which included a mandate to give remunerative prices to farmers at the same time as bringing self-sufficiency in edible oil production to the country. By 1976, India was importing almost 30% of its edible oil requirements (Sekhar 2004: 4733). Verghese Kurien, architect of the cooperative milk revolution in Gujarat<sup>10</sup> recalls in his autobiography that he was called to Delhi in 1977 by India's finance minister, H.M. Patel, who also hailed from Gujarat. Patel asked him if a similar cooperative movement could make the country self-sufficient in vegetable oils and reduce the edible oil import bill, which was then a staggering 1000 crores (Kurien and Salve 2005: 168). Kurien was then Chairman of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). He writes that a cooperative meant "oilseed farmers would have to own and command the system and in the process eliminate the middlemen – the powerful and influential *telia rajahs* (oil kings) who interposed themselves between the producers of the seeds and the consumers of the oil" (Kurien and Salve 2005: 168). State-owned farmers' oilseed cooperatives were started in several states in the country and the one in Madhya Pradesh began in 1979.

S. Lakshminarayan, Managing Director of the MP Oilseed Federation in the 1980s was Registrar of Cooperative Societies in MP in 1981-82. He resurrected a third narrative of the yellow revolution emphasizing his own role in calling upon Kurien to increase soyabean cultivation and create a revolution. He recalled that Kurien wanted assurance from the chief minister that he would be given complete political support. The

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<sup>10</sup> The milk revolution was a result of the cooperative Anand Milk Union Limited (AMUL) started by Kurien to help milk producers become owners of a processing and marketing unit and to enable profits from sales of milk and milk products to reach farmers as dividends.

state government gave free land and a guarantee of support to NDDB. NDDB launched a 700 crore project to start cooperatives amongst oilseed farmers and thus the Madhya Pradesh State Oilseed Growers' Federation (*Tilhan Sangh*, or Oilfed) started on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1979. Dr. M.D. Tedia, Executive Director of the Oilfed in the 1980s, further explained that the NDDB was importing soyabean oil at concessional rates from the US under the PL480 law. Kurien sold this American oil to the MP Oilfed at the same concessional rates while the Oilfed, in turn, sold it to consumers at market rates. The profit from this was used to establish the MP Oilfed.

Prof. Bhatnagar had remarked that earlier people never thought soyabean should be processed for oil. Soyabean was never meant as an oilseed and it was “not at all introduced as an oil crop.” When groundnut has 32-35% oil, sesame has 40% oil and soyabean only has 17-18% oil, why push soyabean as an oil crop, he asked? But in Madhya Pradesh at that time, soyabean was the only oilseed already under cultivation. So although the OilFed (*Tilhan Sangh*) was meant to promote all oil crops, it soon became the “*Soya Sangh*” or SoyaFed in MP.<sup>11</sup>

The thrust of the cooperative Oilfed was to “ensure the cultivator gets the right price, there is an assured buyer, and profit is shared with him.”<sup>12</sup> For this the Oilfed had to own the entire supply chain—from production to processing and export. Kurien made provisions for technical expertise for building a soyabean processing plant, according to Lakshminarayan. NDDB was funded with a grant of 25% and the rest at 2% interest rate when actual bank rates were 18%. Like other private soyabean processors, the Oilfed

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with S. Lakshminarayan, Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi and ex-Managing Director, Madhya Pradesh Oil Federation, Bhopal. Interview taken in Delhi, February 23, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with S. Lakshminarayan, February 23, 2006.

procured, transported, and processed soyabean. Soyabean meal was exported abroad and oil was sold domestically, fulfilling its mandate to contribute to India's development by bringing dollars and promoting self-sufficiency.<sup>13</sup> Sadly, even the Oilfed "directed its whole attention to the export of soyabean meal rather than using it within the country as a protein product," lamented Mr. J.S. Thakur, who retired from the Oilfed in Bhopal in 1990. "It could have pushed it but this aspect was totally ignored. ...Soyabean would have been the cheapest protein for a poor country like India."

But there was an important difference between the Oilfed and private processors. The aim of private processing plants was to buy the cheapest soyabean, but the aim of the Oilfed was to give farmers a *reasonable* price—to see "happiness on the face of the cultivator," according to Mr. Thakur. He added that the market price of soyabean was always greater than the government minimum support price (MSP) because the Oilfed was in the market creating huge demand, otherwise private processors would have colluded to bring down prices. In the 1980s, the Oilfed generated huge demand from its four large processing plants—nearly 3 lakh<sup>14</sup> tons a year in 1990 when total production was 18 lakh tons.<sup>15</sup> It had control over the entire processing chain, and was a vertically integrated system. Farmers found an assured buyer in the Oilfed, which also shared its profits with them through dividends given to members of the cooperative society at the village level. Even Prof. Bhatnagar agreed with this. "Oilfed popularized soyabean in the villages. Farmers got a reasonable price because of this. Otherwise private traders and processors exploited farmers because there was no other market."

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with S. Lakshminarayan, February 23, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> 1 lakh = 100,000

<sup>15</sup> Calculated from per day capacity of 1200 tons per day and 250 days of operations. "Oilseed Processing Facilities," *Madhya Pradesh Oil Federation*, 2005. Available at [www.mp.nic.in/mpoilfed/leasing.htm](http://www.mp.nic.in/mpoilfed/leasing.htm) Accessed January 2, 2007 and (SOPA 2008).

But at the same time, there was always excess processing capacity in the soyabean industry compared to the availability of crop for crushing. In 1984, when Krishna Oil Extraction Ltd. was started by O.P. Goel, the crop size was 5 lakh tons and the processing capacity was already 8 lakh tons. The crop size kept on increasing because the Oilfed did a lot of work for it but processing capacity increased even faster, he said. “Farmers benefited from the excess capacity—there was always a scramble to buy on part of the processors, first at market price and then at a premium. Even if prices fluctuated, farmers would still get a fair price and be able to sell at anytime.”<sup>16</sup> In 2006, processing capacity was 19 million tons while production was just 7 million tons.<sup>17</sup>

The growth of soyabean in MP has been attributed to the grassroots efforts of the Oilfed staff by both insiders and outsiders in the soyabean industry. Here was a solution for farmers that provided them good quality inputs (through a seed program), technical advice (through local extension) and a guaranteed market (through buying at the cooperative level) right at their village. Many people, including scientists, farmers, Oilfed employees, and even private processors claimed that because of the existence of the *Tilhan Sangh*, farmers received a better price. OP Goel, ex-Chairman of the Soyabean Processors Association in Indore said that “the Oilfed transformed soyabean—it gave farmers an assured buyer, assured price, did not cheat them in weight or quality. It supplied seeds, fertilizers and pesticides.”<sup>18</sup>

Further, it provided an opportunity for the government to intervene in the market when the market price fell below the minimum support price. The Oilfed, the Marketing

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with O.P. Goel, ex-Chairman, Soyabean Processors Association, Indore, Feb 28, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Dr. P.S. Bhatnagar, February 28, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with O.P. Goel, January 31, 2006.



Cooperative Federation, and Civil Supplies Corporation were asked by the Government of India to buy on its behalf at Minimum Support Price in such instances. The loss incurred was paid by the Government of India. The Oilfed received 2 crore<sup>19</sup> rupees for this. This “guarantee” of a defined price was one of the main contributions of the Oilfed according to Mr. Thakur.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the Oilfed fulfilled its role not only as bringing about the development of the nation by promoting self-sufficiency in edible oil, but it also became part of the state-driven model of agrarian development which created the conditions for farmers to become “*acche kisan*” [good farmers] and model citizens. According to Dhar district secretary of the Oilfed, Malviyaji, “by becoming members, farmers became part of the ‘soyabean project’ [*Sadasya banke soyabean project se jud gaye*].”<sup>21</sup> The Oilfed provided credit for fertilizers and pesticides along with new seeds to farmers who were members of village level cooperative societies.<sup>22</sup> But only those farmers who had land registered in their name were eligible to become members and thus benefits resulting from membership were restricted to the already better off rural elite.

These narratives of bringing development to Malwa through the yellow revolution focus only on the role of state and market actors as agents. They do not talk about the complexities of ecology and science and the role of farmers that are equally crucial to how the yellow revolution played out in Malwa. It is to this story that we now turn.

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<sup>19</sup> 1 crore = 10 million

<sup>20</sup> Interview with J.S. Thakur, Manager (Retd), Madhya Pradesh Oil Federation, Bhopal. Interview taken in Indore, March 9, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with S.C. Malviya, ex-Manager, Madhya Pradesh Oil Federation, Dhar branch, November 2, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Hanuman Das Gupta, ex-Executive Director, Madhya Pradesh Oil Federation, Bhopal, February 10, 2006.

### **Non-Human Actors and Agrarian Change**

Notwithstanding the various claims by state and market actors to appropriate credit for bringing about the yellow revolution, this section explores the role of non-human actors such as varieties of soyabean, texture of the soil, and properties of stored water alongside human actors such as agricultural scientists and “good farmers” to broaden the story of agrarian change. Doing so challenges the linear story of a revolution. In the 1970s, with increasing international demand for deoiled cake and the take off of soyabean processing in the country, scientists and government officials expected that soyabean would become popular all over India. Yet, soyabean was only picked up by farmers in Madhya Pradesh and the revolution did not happen even in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the original research on soyabean took place. Even today MP is the largest soyabean growing state in the country.

Soil scientist Dr. G. S. Kaushal, ex-Director of the Department of Agriculture, Madhya Pradesh, argued that, “The soil is the important factor. The medium black soil of the state is best suited for soyabean and that is why even though...soyabean was introduced into Pantnagar, and they developed a large number of varieties, but the expansion could not take place in those areas.”<sup>23</sup> But Prof. Bhatnagar emphatically stated to me several times that there was nothing unique about MP’s ecological endowments and that soyabean was versatile enough to take root in a range of places.

So why did soyabean not pick up in UP? Dr. B. B. Singh, Head of the Genetics Research Department at Indian Agricultural Research Institute in Delhi, which has

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<sup>23</sup> *Interview with Dr. G.S. Kaushal*, ex-Director, Department of Agriculture, Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal, February 7, 2006.

produced several soyabean varieties, ventured a more complex explanation. He said that the “decision to grow depends upon two things: surety of production and surety of return.” In Pantnagar, soyabean did not give surety of production because it suffered from the yellow mosaic virus. It compared poorly to rice and sugarcane, which fit well into the ‘very high rainfall’ profile of the region. Farmers were also sure of the returns from paddy (rice) and sugarcane as there was an existing industry of sugar mills and rice mills in Uttar Pradesh. In MP the soya processing industry came up and farmers found an assured market for the crop close to home so they took to soyabean. Moreover, there was no other crop during the rainy season that provided competition to soyabean—and this was because of ‘*kharif* fallows’ as described below.

Dr. O.P. Singh, an entomologist at Sehore Agricultural University in Madhya Pradesh explained that during the rainy season, known as *kharif*, farmers did not plant a crop on much of the land in MP i.e., it was left fallow. “MP has deep black cotton soil. The average rainfall in Malwa is 1000 mm, which is very high. If it starts raining, one won’t see the sun for 7-10 days and intercultural operation (ploughing, sowing, weeding) is not possible in waterlogged fields.”<sup>24</sup>

The original crop cycle in Malwa was one single crop in winter, known as *rabi*. The soil retained water after the rains and wheat and chickpeas grew with the moisture available in the soil itself [*aal mein pak jati thi*].<sup>25</sup> I asked an old farmer, Ratanlalji of Amla village in Ujjain district, about *kharif* fallows. He said when he was younger it rained so much and there was so much water logging that they couldn’t grow anything.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dr. O.P. Singh, Vice President, Research and Development, Dhanuka Group of Companies, New Delhi and ex-Senior Scientist, Sehore Agricultural College, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh. Interview taken in New Delhi, Feb 23, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Vijay Mehta, soyabean trader in Badnagar, Ujjain district, March 1, 2006.

Crops were grown in the rainy season only on higher (well drained) land, which was limited. *Jowar* (sorghum) was one option during *kharif* but it was of long duration, about 150 days, and could not be harvested in time for planting wheat and gram in *rabi*. *Jowar* was grown only in a limited area where the main *rabi* crops would not be planted. Other crops like sesamum collapsed while corn and *jowar* grew poorly in heavy rain in this heavy soil. Pulses like *lal tuvar* (red gram) were also of long duration of six months like *jowar* and could not occupy much area in *kharif*. Dr. O.P. Singh, thus, concluded that “there was no other suitable crop for this heavy soil and heavy rain.” Vakilsahab and Patidarji, rich farmers from Badnagar near Ujjain added another dimension. “Earlier there were not many wells, no tubewells at all, no facilities [*saadhan*], only bullocks. There was only one crop which was unirrigated. ...Farming was dependent on bullocks. So there was no large scale sowing.”<sup>26</sup>

But with soyabean, farmers found a crop that was of just the right duration for the rainy season and which gave an output [*utpadan hota hai*] under all negative circumstances [*vipreet paristhithi*]. “Whether there is less rain or more rain, something will come in soyabean,” according to Omkar Singh Chauhan,<sup>27</sup> a well-known farmer from Dhar district who farmed 60 hectares.<sup>28</sup> Dr. O.P. Singh described the technical characteristics of the plant as follows: “Soyabean has a tap root system which goes 1-1.5 feet below from where it can take water. Temporarily it can develop aerial roots in water logged conditions. Most soyabean varieties can tolerate heavy rain, water logging and

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Nasir Jagirdar and Laxminarayan Patidar, Proprietor of Krishi Darshan Farm Implements, Maulana village, Badnagar, Ujjain district, March 2, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> The names of all farmers have been changed according to anthropological custom. The names of private entrepreneurs, traders, government officials, and scientists have not been changed.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Omkar Singh Chauhan, Baggad village, Dhar district. Interview taken in Indore, March 3, 2006.

drought.” His colleague, Dr. K.K. Nema, of Sehore Agricultural University agreed. “With three days of water logged fields *urad* [black gram] is finished. Soyabean leaves will turn yellow but it will recover with application of urea. Soyabean is a hardy crop and it is a cash crop.”<sup>29</sup> Farmer Omkar Singh Chauhan emphasized the ability to withstand drought—crops like corn and lentils like *urad* and *moong* will die if there is no rain for 20-25 days but soyabean will survive, he noted.

Soyabean, thus, provided a good replacement or filler for the fallow season of *kharif* in Malwa. The amount of rainfall was ideal for its growth without the need for irrigation and it matured just in time for the planting of *rabi*. The biggest advantage of soyabean varieties that were created to suit Indian conditions was that they grew in 100-120 days instead of 134-139 days as in the United States. They fit into the time of *kharif*.<sup>30</sup> Since it did not affect the winter crop, the commodity balance was not disturbed.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, said Dr. Kaushal, “because it was a new crop...it was free from pest, insect, diseases and the soil was...rich in nutrients and they [farmers] got good production and good return also.” Farmer Madho Singh Patel of Hatod village called it a “free crop because farmers didn’t do anything in the rainy season anyway.”<sup>32</sup>

Still, by 1980 the total soyabean acreage in the country was less than 3 lakh hectares and total production just 96,000 tons.<sup>33</sup> The yellow varieties developed from US strains had a problem with seed viability—they had very poor germination and they were

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Dr. K.K. Nema, Scientist, Sehore Agricultural University, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh, January 25, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Prof. P.S. Bhatnagar, January 31, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Dr. B.B. Singh, Head, Division of Genetics, Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi, February 17, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Madho Singh Patel, Hatod village, Indore district, March 24, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Dr. G.P. Saxena, ex-Joint Director of Agriculture, Department of Agriculture, Madhya Pradesh, and Director of Extension, Soyabean Processors Association, Indore, March 3, 2006.

susceptible to the yellow mosaic virus according to Dr. Bhatnagar. The local black variety gave very poor yields compared to the yellow varieties. Only in 1975, the first successful black Indian variety known as Punjab-1 was released by JNKVV. It was created using genetic strains from China. But it faced problems such as excessive vegetative growth and pod shattering. Dr. G.P. Saxena, Joint Director in the MP Agriculture Department earlier and now Head of Extension Activities in SOPA (Soyabean Processors Association) explained: “The stem would branch and spread [*phailna*] in the field like a climber. The seed would shatter and fall to the ground when the pod burst and reduce the yield. Leguminous crops like soyabean disperse seed in this way and are known as aerophilic.”

In 1981, a locally developed variety scientifically known as JS-72-44 was officially released. It was the first seed which created a sensation [*jisne tehelka macha diya*] according to farmer Omkar Singh Chauhan. It had already become popular by its local name Gaurav. Its germination rate was lower but the yield was higher compared to Punjab-1. According to Dr. Saxena, this increased acreage very fast—from 3 lakh hectares in 1981 to 26 lakh hectares in 1991. But Chauhan said it had its own share of problems. It was a long duration variety [*samay adhik*] of almost 115 to 120 days causing a delay for the sowing in *rabi*. Also, it had more vegetative growth, its stalk would grow higher and so it would fall and cause damage to the seeds.

Finally in 1994, a new variety JS-335 brought the most change in terms of yield. Its popularity changed the picture all over India according to Dr. Saxena. More than 90% of the coverage in India is with JS-335 today. Chauhan explained its characteristics: “It had better germination, the best actually. The duration was less, just 95-100 days. The

stem was strong and it needed less seeds. The production was also 5-7 quintal more per hectare compared to JS 72-44 and Punjab 1.” From 1994 to 2006, the total soyabean production in the country almost doubled from 39 lakh tons to 73 lakh tons (SOPA 2008). Birendra Singh Pawar, a 100-hectare, mechanized farmer from Bhatoni village in Dewas district said that JS-335 brought about the biggest revolution in soyabean. “If it had not been there, there would be no soyabean left today.”

Farmers like Omkar Singh Chauhan, Birendra Singh Pawar and Madho Singh Patel are seed breeders. They sow “F1” foundation seeds in their farm obtained from government institutes like the National Research Centre for Soyabean or the Seed Corporation and from private companies like Manikya Agrotech. Some of their output is sold back to the government or to the same private companies who package it and sell it to farmers as good quality “certified seeds.” The seed left over is bought by other “good farmers” in the area who have contacts with each other and are always on the lookout for new, good quality seeds. These farmers pride themselves on developing new hybrid varieties through breeding on their own farms. Vignesh Singh Rathod, although a tiny farmer compared to Omkar Singh or Birendra Singh, is the main source of new seeds in Ranipura. He, too, buys foundation seeds from the Seed Corporation or private pesticide and seed shops in Dhar, multiplies them on his 13 hectares and sells them to villagers after cleaning and grading them using family labour. Omkar Singh and Hukum Singh Rathod had obtained a new variety, Brazil-1 directly from a South American group of farmers visiting the Soyabean Processors Association in Indore and had planted it in 2006. Agricultural scientists were not aware of this variety and were quick to point out

the illegal nature of such direct exchange, especially since India does not allow the import of genetically-modified soyabean.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, soyabean would not have become popular but for the massive informal sharing of new varieties and seeds with friends and extended family members in the farming community. Many farmers in Ranipura obtained the seeds of a new variety such as NRC-7 from relatives in far off villages near Ujjain and Neemuch—places where their daughters and sisters were married and where social obligations mandated several visits during the year. Those who were not directly connected to government institutes and private corporations obtained seeds from “good farmers” who were. Such practices are not new. In fact, they form the backbone of any agrarian transformation. But they are ignored in narratives that locate the agency of agrarian change within institutions inhabited by state or market actors.

### **The Soyabean Technological Complex**

The teleological narrative of the yellow revolution focuses primarily on the introduction and popularization of soyabean cultivation in the 1970s and 1980s and culminates with a triumphant discussion of the monetary benefits it has brought to Malwa. However, since the 1990s, serious ecological problems have arisen in Malwa that can be traced to the introduction of soyabean in the region. I call the set of circumstances, which have resulted in monetary benefits at the same time as ecological decline, the soyabean-technological complex. The soyabean-technological complex today is epitomized by a farmer draining out water from the fields in the monsoons to grow

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<sup>34</sup> Indian soyabean processors have lobbied the government to maintain this ban because India's non-genetically modified (non-GM) soyabean gives them a niche market for GM-free deoiled cake in countries like Japan. *Interview with Rajesh Agrawal*, Chairman, Soyabean Processors Association, Indore, March 4, 2006.



soyabean<sup>35</sup> and using the handsome profits earned from selling soyabean to dig more tubewells on his land to get water to irrigate winter wheat. The wheat is a water intensive, high yielding variety that is grown for part self-consumption and part market sale, even though the farmer is aware that extracting more water in winter from the soil heralds still more trying times in the summer when even drinking water will have to be brought in large plastic drums from far away sources on bullock carts or cycles or tractors.

Farmers recognize the ecological fragility of sustaining this cropping pattern year after year, especially in the face of a failed year of rain when the soil aquifers do not get recharged. Their understanding of agrarian change is not limited to the introduction of soyabean cultivation alone. Rather, they include the introduction of new technologies for water extraction and for mechanizing agricultural work within the ambit of what has brought about change. Further, they do not refer to agrarian change in evolutionary, teleological terms of “development” or “revolution” but as an impermanent state of prosperity within which is inherent the seed of decline.

Ujjain district is one of the most prosperous in Malwa with more than 100-feet deep fertile black soils. Badnagar, a small town 40 kilometers from the city of Ujjain, has historically been a trading post, initially of opium in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and cotton in the 20<sup>th</sup>. The village of Maulana is 3 km from Badnagar on the highway to Ujjain and has one of the most famous agro-implements workshops in the region making and sell threshers, plows, seed drills, sprayers and other equipment. I spent an afternoon with Laxminarayan Patidarji, the owner of the workshop and his lawyer friend, Nasir Jagirdar (*Vakilsahab*), discussing the coming of soyabean and the transformation of the area. “Lot of farmers

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<sup>35</sup> Although soyabean grows in waterlogged conditions, the yield is two to three times higher in well-drained soils.

bought land through money made from soyabean,” he started out. “From 20 bigha to 100 bigha—soyabean was the base. My father has two more brothers. All three had 60 bigha each. Now I have 200 bigha because I bought land through soyabean money. Fifteen years have been very good with soyabean, ever since the 1980s.”

The financial remuneration resulting from soyabean cultivation was expressed in superlative terms by many. Farmer Omkar Singh Chauhan said it was most beneficial for poor farmers with no source of irrigation: “what a farmer got with maize and wheat he got with soyabean alone. ...In our area [Malwa] farmers will do soyabean even if no *rabi* crop is taken because it is more remunerative.” Vijay Mehta, a soyabean trader and market yard representative from Badnagar said, “For farmers soyabean brought economic prosperity [*aarthik samriddhi*—it led to a construction boom in the village, people bought two wheelers, four wheelers.”<sup>36</sup> Subhashji, the proprietor of Mahendra Bros, an old trading firm in Dhar district said, “Malwa has become a prosperous garden. Soyabean is a boon for this area [*Malwa chaman ban gaya hai. Soyabean vardaani hai is area ke liye.*].” Narendra Mehta, another soyabean trader in Dhar mandi said, “With new soyabean varieties the output increased and farmers bought many tractors. Prosperity [*sampannata*] came because of soyabean. It is the gold of Malwa [*Malwa ka sona*].” Dr. M.D. Tedia, an agricultural scientist and Executive Director of the Oilfed in Bhopal, who had received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1972, proclaimed that soyabean was the “wonder crop of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” and the “meat of the fields”. The Soyabean Processors’ Association’s (SOPA) magazine called it “the miracle bean.” Prof. P. S. Bhatnagar concurred: “Earlier farmers sold wheat and made their children eat *jowar*

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Vijay Mehta, March 1, 2006.

[sorghum] and *bajra* [millet]. Now it has all changed. ...Women and children were the worst sufferers earlier and didn't get enough food. Now there is enough food for everyone. Farmers are sending their children to school, colleges because their income has increased. ...There are so many more televisions, tractors, cooking gas, two-wheelers, four-wheelers, fridge, etc. in the villages." Nevertheless, he wryly stated, "the cream of soyabean was eaten by the processors and the farmers got only the leftovers [*soyabean ki malai processors kha gaye, kisan ko sirf khurchan mili*]." The massive bungalows on MG Road (the posh thoroughfare of Indore) all came up because of the rise of soyabean according to him.

Yet, Patidarji of Maulana village pointed out that "prosperity [*khushali*] [wa]s only partly a result of soyabean. There has been a lot of development in farming. We got good electricity at the same time as soyabean came. So we drilled tubewells and were able to grow an irrigated second crop. Those who had enough water were able to do short duration potato, peas, and onions before planting irrigated wheat."<sup>37</sup> Both soyabean and irrigated wheat brought about a double cropping system in Malwa and the increased income encouraged farmers to bring more and more grassland under cultivation. They had the purchasing power to buy newly available technologies such as electricity, tubewells, and power pumps for water extraction and tractors for ploughing and cultivation. "Once there was double cropping, farmer got more money to buy things. It especially impacted the bazaar outside the *mandi*. The trade of the entire Malwa region

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<sup>37</sup> Farmers in Ranipura village also explained the change in the last 40 years as being a cumulative result of many different things and not soyabean alone.

improved. Most importantly, farmer's financial condition [*maali haalath*] improved without much extra hard work," according to trader Narendra Mehta of the Dhar *mandi*.<sup>38</sup>

Albeit with some ups and downs in its market price, soyabean has remained financially remunerative. The rate of soyabean at harvest in October 2007 was Rs. 1500 a quintal rising to more than Rs. 2000 in January 2008. The minimum support price is Rs. 1010 and usual rates at harvest hover between Rs. 1100-1200. The reason for this phenomenal increase in price was related to changes taking place in the US. Technologies for making biodiesel from corn became affordable with the huge rise in crude oil prices in the last few years. With the rush to build biodiesel plants, corn became a sought after commodity in 2007 with its prices increasing by several fold. Farmers in the US, the largest producer of corn and soyabean in the world, shifted acreage to corn and away from soyabean. This led to a shortage in total production of soyabean in the world and Indian soyabean farmers benefited from the resulting rise in prices (Chandrashekhar 2007, Dale 2007, Wynn and Boselli 2007). The financial remuneration from soyabean was truly phenomenal.

The sowing of soyabean in July 2007 had been delayed due to late and erratic rains. By the time it was harvested in October, the monsoons were over. Farmers, who usually relied on the last vestiges of the monsoon to sow wheat in the residual moisture, could not do so without watering the fields first. In November-December of 2007, the Highland machine to dig a borewell did not leave Ranipura for a month and a half. Almost 80 tubewells costing about Rs. 1 million were dug in Ranipura. The extra income accruing from the sale of soyabean fed the rush to drill more borewells. Out of the 80

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Narendra Mehta, soyabean trader in Dhar *mandi*, Dhar, February 27, 2007.

tubewells, not more than ten, in fact, resulted in water and even in them, farmers reported, the water level and intensity of flow had gone down by February 2008. According to conventional wisdom tubewells should be drilled in the summer, when ground water is at its lowest point, so that one bores deep enough to ensure that water is available all throughout the growing season in winter. Although they understand this logic, farmers in Ranipura say that they need the water most to irrigate winter wheat, especially when their existing tubewells stop functioning in November. This is the time when the water requirement is so high that it is worthwhile to dig a borewell—farmers may be able to irrigate their standing crop and reap the benefits in that season itself. The extra income from wheat would possibly cover the cost of the tubewell. Moreover, they will not have to drill as deep as in the summer because water levels will be higher with the monsoon having just ended. But then, farmers also know that such a bore may not last for the entire *rabi* season—it certainly won't have any water for the summer—and may not work at all the following year.

What exactly is at work here?

The soyabean-wheat technology complex worked in Malwa by inverting the cycle of water—a critical shift in a dryland region where the only source of irrigation is groundwater. Malwa is a plateau from where many rivers originate—Maahi, Chambal, Shipra—but they are all small in size until they leave Madhya Pradesh. There are only two main dams that provide irrigation through canals—Gandhisagar in the north and Tawa in the south (the Halali dam has a small canal network near Bhopal). But in the heart of Malwa—Ujjain, Dhar, Dewas, Indore and Shajapur, the only source of irrigation is rainwater that has either been stored in ponds or in the ground. According to a report

by Samaj Pragati Sahyog, an NGO and academic research organization in Bagli tehsil of Dewas district:

[Malwa] is covered with deep black soils, traditionally considered as best suited for cotton cultivation. These soils are formed by the weathering of Deccan Trap basalts. ...With low percentage of irrigated area, *jowar* [sorghum] was the main *kharif* crop. During *rabi* season, unirrigated wheat varieties such as *Jalalia*, *Tigria* and *Pissi* were grown primarily on residual soil moisture in deeper and water retentive black soils (Vijay Shankar 2006a).

During the time of *kharif* fallows, prior to soyabean, farmers created bunds<sup>39</sup> along the fields to allow water to soak into the soil during monsoons. All throughout the rains farmers would plough the land using bullocks to ensure that weeds did not grow and take away the fertility and moisture of the soil. Substantial area was left untilled as grass for fodder. Thus, large tracts of land were uncultivated—almost 60%. Only some lentils, maize, and *jowar* (sorghum) were grown, mostly for home consumption and fodder, on high, well-drained ground. “Land on which wheat was grown during the *rabi* season was kept uncultivated during the preceding *kharif* season. This was also necessitated by the tendency of deep black soils in topographically low-lying regions to get water-logged during *kharif*” (Vijay Shankar 2006a). Un-irrigated wheat was expected to grow in the moisture retained by the soil in the winter. A good crop of “unirrigated wheat gave 3-4 quintal per bigha (half an acre) while unirrigated *chana* (gram) gave only 2 quintal per bigha. But we used to have a lot of rain earlier and could grow wheat and chickpeas without irrigation,” according to Patidarji of Maulana village. In effect, the system of *kharif* fallows was followed *because* the water availability for irrigation was low.

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<sup>39</sup> A bund is a boundary made out of mud demarcating fields of different farmers. It can also be used to block certain sections of the field to allow water to accumulate and irrigate the soil.

Soyabean, on the other hand, requires well-drained fields so its introduction during the monsoon season shifted the main aim of farmers from storing/saving water to draining out all the water from the field. Since soyabean was so remunerative, farmers started bringing in more and more area under cultivation, leaving less land for grazing and lesser for ground water recharge. In Ranipura, farmers were draining out overflowing wells by channeling the water away from the fields. In places where they had not done so, they faced waterlogging of fields that were below the overflow level of the well, which substantially reduced soyabean yields. The water which was considered to be a '*requirement*' for un-irrigated wheat became '*excess*' for soyabean. After taking a crop of soyabean the residual soil moisture was inadequate to support the wheat crop. If it rained during or after the soyabean harvest [*pichala pani*], farmers could still plant un-irrigated winter wheat. But if it did not, then irrigation would be required (Vijay Shankar 2006a). In the month of October, especially, when day temperatures became very high, wheat could not be sown without watering the fields first.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time as the arrival of soyabean in the 1970s came electricity, pipes, diesel-run motors, and technology for digging tubewells known as cutter machines. The first tubewell was dug in Ranipura in 1986 and surface wells stopped working in 1992. Tubewells replaced wells and ponds as a source of water. Further, new varieties of water-intensive wheat also became available in the 1970s, which increased wheat output by four times. Using water from newly drilled tubewells, farmers "increasingly *substituted* unirrigated wheat varieties by high yielding varieties of wheat (such as WH-147) which needed large scale irrigation. While only 13% of wheat area was under irrigation in 1970-

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Karan Singh Pawar, ex-Member of Legislative Assembly, Dhar, August 24, 2006.

71, nearly 90% of the wheat area was under irrigation by 1993-94” (Vijay Shankar 2006a). The increased income from soyabean gave farmers the resources to invest in technologies to extract ground water in winter and consequently encouraged the planting of high yielding varieties of wheat and water-intensive chick peas over a larger and expanding area of cultivation.

In the 1970s, out of a total of 900 bigha in Ranipura village, more than one third was grassland. By the turn of the century all the common land, government land, grazing land, and fallow land in the village was progressively occupied by soyabean in *kharif*. Even during *rabi*, there were very few empty fields. If a farmer did not have his own source of irrigation, he leased out the field to someone else who did, in an agreement known as *paanti*, and shared fifty percent of the output. “As access to irrigation facilities increased, the thrust of the agricultural strategy came to be the maximisation of productivity per unit of land by intensive cultivation of every bit of available agricultural land” (Vijay Shankar 2006a). Agricultural intensification in Malwa led to the complete abandonment of the system of *kharif* fallow followed earlier.

Karan Singh Pawar, ex-MLA from Dhar, has been managing his agricultural fields for the last 20 years. He has been conducting experiments with all kinds of crop varieties. He explained that traditionally, Malwa has never had much sowing in *kharif* season. But after the coming of soyabean there was complete sowing during *kharif* on his fields in Pipalkheda, about five kilometres from Dhar. “There was enough ground water available to exploit and double crop the area until 1984-85. That was the best year when water in the tubewell was available at 50 feet and the output was 1000 quintals of soyabean and 1000 quintals of wheat.”



But progressively, the water table began to fall and the entire cycle became unsustainable. As more and more farmers planted these winter water-intensive crops, the water table started declining. Soon water was available only after 100 feet, then after 200 feet, and in 10-15 years, 600 feet tubewells also did not yield water. This is because after the shallow ground water was completely extracted within a few years (wells dried up by the 1990s), what was being extracted was ancient water embedded in volcanic rock making up the Malwa plateau. The black soil is between 5-100 feet deep. Below that is hard impervious basalt formed millions of years ago and known as the Deccan trap. The black cotton soil has been formed through the weathering of this basalt. Water was trapped in crevices or fracture zones of igneous rocks as various lava flows cooled and hardened one on top of the other. P.S. Vijay Shankar of Samaj Pragati Sahyog has conducted research on the geology of Malwa and explains:

Much of the land area in Western MP is underlain by basaltic lava flows of the Deccan Trap formation, which are rocks of igneous origin, formed by the cooling of molten material. ...the natural rate of replenishment of groundwater is usually very low in these rocks. Hence, while there can be often be fairly large reservoirs of stored water in hard rock aquifers (accumulated over several thousand years), the renewability of this resource in flow terms is likely to be limited (Vijay Shankar 2005: 5020).

Tubewell technology has enabled farmers to tap into this very old groundwater, known as 'primary water', which is not rechargeable through surface water or rain water because the rock is impervious. The pace of extraction has been very high, leading farmers to dig deeper and deeper tubewells as the shallow aquifers within these rocks are emptied. The low rate of success is mainly because water is only available in unexploited aquifers, which are now scarce or at least deeper than before. Moreover, explains Vijay Shankar, "because the extent of weathering and structural deformations is never uniform, [there is] high variability of groundwater availability within a drainage basin. ...[There

is] very little connectivity and transmissivity between the aquifers ...making it very difficult for water to replenish the discharge zone from the recharge zone” (Vijay Shankar 2005: 5020).

Surface aquifers, which are within the soil strata and pervious rock, fill up within the first two weeks of strong monsoon rains and rest of the water has to be drained out of the fields to save the soyabean. Karan Singh Pawar says that “we are not giving [the water] sufficient time to percolate to the ground water level in the planted fields.” Rather than recharging the surface aquifers as happened in the past prior to soyabean cultivation, 90% of the water today is wasted as runoff. Double cropping is almost universal in the region, although the increasing lack of availability of water has reduced yields of wheat as reducing amounts of water have to be spread across the same number of fields. The consequence has been reduced water availability throughout the year and unbearable floods during the monsoons.

Today the ground water crisis has come to a head. No amount of surface recharge is going to bring back the ancient ground water that has been tapped by the farmers already. Although the state government has banned boring of new tubewells in most districts of Malwa, farmers argue that they do not have any other choice. They do not want to shift from water intensive varieties of wheat because even with less irrigation, they yield more than unirrigated varieties. Leaving land fallow during the soyabean season to promote recharge of surface aquifers again causes immediate economic loss. Those without sources of irrigation grow unirrigated chickpeas in *rabi* but continue their efforts every year to dig tubewells in different locations on their land in the hope of striking water.

Describing the agrarian transformation of Malwa as a “yellow revolution” spearheaded by powerful state and market actors that has brought about development is, of course, inadequate. It removes from the story various human and non-human actors who play as much a role as these other powerful actors in bringing about change (Mitchell 2002, Latour 1992, Caliskan 2007, Gidwani 2008). More importantly, the linear, progressive, value-laden language of development obscures the underlying shifts in practices that are in effect taking place. Rather than filling up the empty space of the *kharif* fallows and being a free crop for farmers, soyabean farming replaced important farm practices related to water management in an agrarian system that took into account low water availability. By draining water instead of replenishing it and by financing farm investment in water-extraction technologies, soyabean played a crucial role in transforming Malwa ecologically.

The vital distinction farmers make in describing agrarian change is by using words like “prosperity” and “plenty” [*samriddhi*, *sampannata*, *khushali*] rather than “development” [*vikas*]. Farmers in dryland Malwa face uncertainties every year, every cropping season—if it is not the terrible timing and frequency of the rain, or even excess rain, it is the drought. If it is not the sudden pest attack, or the weeds, it is the failed electricity or a dried tubewell, or even a combination of them all. As farmers in Ranipura often said, one can never know how much will ripen until it [soyabean, wheat, maize, etc.] is safely [threshed and stored] inside the house. 2001 was a year of massive drought in Malwa and most of Ranipura had nothing to eat. After some well-off villagers led by Suraj Jat, the village head, started a food for work program digging a pond in the village, the government responded by providing monetary support. Farmers remember the

drought as much as they remember the extremely high soyabean prices they received for their crop in 2004.

Prosperity and plenty embody within them the recognition that agricultural change is always contingent upon the coalescing together of various factors, many of which are not in farmers' hands. Unlike development, which has a moral connotation of permanently moving away from a perceived backwardness (Pigg 1992), prosperity denotes a state which may not be everlasting at all. Falling on hard times after a time of prosperity does not necessarily have a moral implication about a person or a region—it invites investigation into multiple causes for such a decline while accepting that decline is as much a part of change as prosperity (see Ferguson 1999).

### **Managing the Water Crisis: Alternatives to Soyabean**

In the last 5 years, a re-evaluation of the 'gift of soyabean' [*soyabean ki daen*] is already taking place in Malwa. Farmer Madho Singh Patel said in March 2006 that soyabean cultivation has become very expensive although it really helped farmers.<sup>41</sup> "Farmers are now looking for a replacement of soyabean, which can give the same amount of income especially with rising costs. ...Recently expenses have increased because herbicides have come on the market. ...Also pests are attacking more—girdle beetle and stem borer require medicines to be sprayed twice. 25% of the revenue goes into this."<sup>42</sup> Mr. A. Khan, extension officer in the Agricultural Department in Bhopal also mentioned that weeds had become a big problem requiring the application of expensive

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<sup>41</sup> These doubts were raised before the harvest of 2007 when prices skyrocketed to Rs. 1600 and then to Rs. 2000. In 2008, the prices hovered between 1500-1600 rupees a quintal. The economics of soyabean has regained profitability, at least temporarily.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Madho Singh Patel, March 24, 2006.

herbicides.<sup>43</sup> But more importantly, he stressed that inputs like fertilizers and chemicals were not available to farmers on time, causing immense losses in the yield.<sup>44</sup>

Dr. K.K. Nema from Sehore Agricultural University also agreed that the cost of production had gone up and productivity had gone down. He explained, “Productivity of soyabean is very low today because for 20-25 years soyabean has been grown in the same field. Diseases, pests have now multiplied. ...Earlier one could get 15-16 quintals per hectare in production. The cost was Rs. 9555 per hectare. So at the rate of 1000 Rs per quintal, farmers got a profit. Today there is no profit. Production for a good farmer is 10-12 quintals per hectare and the rest only produce 4-5 quintals per hectare. So farmers want to leave soyabean.”<sup>45</sup> My own experience in Ranipura showed that monocropping created the fear of the spread of an epidemic of intensive pest attacks and created a cycle of relying on more potent and ever more expensive pesticides. Pesticide dealers and private companies have reaped a fortune, while growing soyabean has become less and less remunerative. Vijay Mehta, the trader from Badnagar summarized it succinctly: “Farmers are hung in the middle; there is no future seen in soyabean so they are wondering what to do.”<sup>46</sup>

But, unfortunately, even with its reducing productivity or increasing cost, soyabean is still a better crop compared to other possible substitutes. Farmer Omkar Singh Chauhan explained that farmers were turning to other things as a replacement for soyabean. But the returns were not the same. With *makka* [corn], a 2-5% increase in the

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<sup>43</sup> According to Karan Singh Pawar, by using weedicides, traditional weeds that could be eaten by cattle and were suitable for the climate of Malwa died. However, this gave rise to new weeds like *dudhi*, which are not consumed by cattle and grow to unmanageable proportions. Interview, Dhar, July 14, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with A. Khan, Extension Officer, Agricultural Department, Bhopal, January 23, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Dr. K.K. Nema, January 25, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Vijay Mehta, March 1, 2006.

erstwhile steady cropping area had lowered the prices. Similarly with *jowar* [sorghum] the price fell because buyers are poultry farms and liquor factories, whose demand is fixed and is not a lot. Moreover, although *desi* [country] *jowar* gives a good rate, it takes 5-6 months to grow while hybrid Shankar *jowar* grows in 100-120 days but the rate is less and it is not very tasty. He further elaborates:

“If you sow full *kharif* with *makka* or *jowar*, one can’t handle all of it. *Saadhan kam hain* [facilities are not there]. *Jowar* and *makka* need more handling. ... You have to peel the cob and dry it in the sun to be able to thresh it. There is a problem of how to dry it in the godown. 5 quintals of soyabean is equal to 10 quintals of corn in weight and price of corn is much less, but you need more space. Soyabean is easier to handle, there is less effort [*mehnat*]<sup>47</sup>—it can be harvested and threshed in one day and one can sow *rabi* crops sooner. With corn one can’t do sowing immediately because you have to clean the field, remove the [long tap root] from the soil, etc.”

Prof. Bhatnagar concurred: “Corn and sorghum were replacing soyabean when productivity of the latter became low. But because there was a lot of production, the price fell down and many farmers didn’t even harvest it. But with soyabean prices can never precipitously fall because demand is 19 lakh tons and production is 6 lakh tons. There is so much excess capacity so it is a safe crop.”<sup>47</sup> O.P. Goel, ex-Chairman of the Soyabean Processors Association says “It is very difficult to uproot soyabean because farmers have less hassles and are making good money. It is the only such crop to be so.”<sup>48</sup>

But replacing soyabean with something else during the rainy season does not affect practices related to water management. As long as anything is grown in the monsoons and water is drained out of the fields, preventing the recharge of shallow aquifers, and as long as water-intensive varieties of wheat are grown in the winter using tubewell water from deep aquifers, the crisis will continue to grow.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Prof. P.S. Bhatnagar, January 31, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with O.P. Goel, January 29, 2006.

### **Managing the Water Crisis: Conservation and Recharge**

The seriousness of water scarcity cropped up in my very first conversations with farmers in Dhar, even before I had chosen Ranipura village for extended fieldwork. Karan Singh Pawar and I traveled together to Jhumki block headquarters and he introduced me to some local farmers who had also helped him campaign for the elections. It was March 2006 and the wheat was being harvested. The conversation quickly veered towards the scarcity of water and poor availability of electricity reducing the production of wheat. The main discussion focused around water and how best to increase its availability. Pawar then helped the farmers recount all the good work he had done for water works in the area during his tenure (1998-2003)—construction of a few canals, two stop dams, and obtaining sanction for an electricity grid. Many of Pawar's supporters had voted against him in the last election, "despite all the good development work I did," he said. Currently, the MLA was from the opposite party, the BJP.

A farmer in the group initiated a discussion on the recharging of tubewell aquifers by letting the rain water from the entire surrounding area drain into the tubewell hole in the ground. Pawar tried to reason with the farmer and explain the severe health consequences that could result from such a long term strategy. He said, "I have tried it in my own fields and it works for a short while. But then it fails." Despite putting a strainer on the mouth of the tubewell, some garbage and mud always goes in. Most important, the pesticides, weedicides, and other chemicals from the soyabean field go in directly. "You can't play with nature. The tubewell water is [usable] only after the filtration process of the soil. ...So many people have had severe health problems like paralysis [*lakhua*] by drinking water from such recharged tubewells." The farmer, a staunch BJP supporter,

insisted that he had tried it and it worked. “There should be a [government] scheme that forces everyone to fill their holes. Then only we can solve the water problem.”

Mr. Vijay Shankar of Samaj Pragati Sahyog (SPS) has been working for several years with farmers in Dewas district to promote a more holistic and long term understanding of the ecological crisis. SPS’s research suggests that “replenishment of highly depleted groundwater aquifers [is possible] through strategically located surface water storage structures and sub-surface dams” (Vijay Shankar 2006b).<sup>49</sup> Several large farmers in Malwa have tried to recharge rock aquifers by directing surface run-off into existing tubewell holes. Dr. Najmi, senior hydrologist in Dhar, explained that such recharge will be limited by the size of the confined aquifer from which the water has been extracted. If the tubewell cuts through many aquifers, the lowest one will fill first and then the ones above it. Dr. Najmi felt it was a good idea to try and recharge tubewell aquifers but did not expect much success over the long term.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, Pawar advocates that in *kharif*, 75% of the area should be planted with soyabean along with other crops while 25% should be left fallow for collecting rain water and percolating it into the ground. Another strategy could be planting that 25% area with an early spice crop such as coriander [*dhaniya*] or carom [*ajwain*], which would give at least a few weeks of recharge time before the planting of *rabi*. The government has been promoting and subsidizing surface aquifer recharge schemes such as farm ponds and

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<sup>49</sup> Samaj Pragati Sahyog has been promoting trials of less water intensive wheat varieties with farmers in Dewas district. Vijay Shankar writes that, “A return to the earlier low yield regime is both unfeasible and undesirable. Our objective of conducting *rabi* season trials in wheat has been to identify varieties which can give yields comparable to the varieties currently in vogue, even in a regime which is less water-intensive” (Vijay Shankar 2006a). But at the same time, they stress the need for the “regulation of end-uses of water through community management of groundwater, low cost drip irrigation and diversification of the crop production systems using drought-resistant varieties and crops that require less water” (Vijay Shankar 2006b).

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Mr. Najmi, Senior Hydrologist, Water Resources Department, Dhar, April 23, 2007.



village ponds. But taking away land from cultivation to recharge water has not been the most popular item on the agenda of farmers in Ranipura and elsewhere. Instead, they are experimenting with tubewell aquifer recharge, regardless of its uncertain consequences, and they are focused on drilling more tubewells in clear defiance of government laws banning any new tubewells in Jhumki block.

Since the 1990s, there has been a spurt in bringing grassland, grazing land, and other common land under cultivation by farmers, at the expense of keeping areas aside for their animals to graze. Farmers suggest that because of the remuneration offered by soyabean and subsequently by wheat or unirrigated gram, as well as the technologies that make cultivation easier, they are keen to farm as much area as possible. But why would they continue to participate in this spiraling journey downwards when the very water and soil upon which their entire existence is premised, may no longer be able to support them?

I would like to suggest that there is one factor that much analysis of the green and the yellow revolutions misses out. This is the creation, partly during colonial times and much more strongly after independence, of a metaphor that reframes a particular narrowly defined vision of farming as a vital contribution to the development of the nation. I argue that this vision fundamentally shapes the relationship between the state and farmers such that it legitimizes a shifting of scarce resources to a set of already powerful rural interests while at the same time giving a metaphor to those rural interests to continue to successfully make demands upon the state to ensure their well-being. As a result, not only are powerful rural interests supported at the expense of the poor and the

weak, but also the practices which cause ecological decline continue to foster in the name of national development.

### **Making “Good Farmers”**

When I started my research on the introduction of soyabean in MP, I was directed to meet “*acche kisan*” by agricultural scientists and private processors in Indore. “*Acche kisan*” or “good farmers” were connected to these state and market actors through the seed breeding networks described earlier. “Good farmers” were interested in new seeds and new technologies; they implemented new techniques on their farms, and were progressive, modernizing farmers. They interacted with scientists at the National Research Centre for Soyabean and at the Indore Agricultural College as well as directly with retired scientists such as Prof. Bhatnagar seeking technical-know how and advice as the soyabean and wheat season progressed every year.

“Good farmers” reflected a vision of agriculture that can be traced to colonial times (Ludden 1992) and to the recent past during the green revolution, which took root in the 1960s in India, when increasing productivity and pushing for higher production became defined as agricultural development. Farmers were enrolled in the process of making India self-sufficient in food grains, which became the sole aim of agricultural policy. Ironically, Nick Cullather (2008) has shown how the economic policies of the planning commission during the 1950s, including imports of PL480 wheat from the United States, in effect, led to decreased domestic wheat production—a fact expected by planners who were focused more on promoting industrialization. He thus reframes the situation of India in the early 1960s as one of induced lower agricultural production rather than as one where the country was inherently unable to produce enough to feed

itself. Moreover, historians have shown that the green revolution took off more as result of the coming together of various forces including the availability of hybrid seed technologies, populist measures of the state to ensure its own survival, and a growing demand for state support of rural interests through subsidies (Frankel 2005, Varshney 1995). However, the vision of agricultural development as higher production and greater productivity continued to inform agrarian policy and became the dominant frame within which relationships between farmers and the state played out in India.

On the one hand, the state was obliged to provide farmers with support so that they could produce more and be more efficient, and thus bring about development. At the same time, farmers appropriated the language of development as entitlement and articulated their demand to become developed through the mechanisms of democratic politics. In Madhya Pradesh, in the context of the yellow revolution, the metaphor used by farmers to make claims upon the state, is that of the “good farmer.”

Omkar Singh Chauhan and Birendra Singh Pawar were “good farmers” introduced to me by Dr. Bhatnagar. Chauhan was one of the most famous and well-respected farmers in Malwa, well known in soyabean circles, and was often invited to represent the views of farmers in conferences in Indore. He was middle-aged and despite wearing a shirt and pant, had a rustic, village-look. He farmed 250 bigha (about 60 hectares or one-fourth of the village land) in his village in Dhar district, and mostly planted breeder or foundation seeds obtained from private companies or the government. His house in the village was equivalent to a posh bungalow in an upper middle class locality in Delhi with a beautiful garden in front and a long driveway. He had built huge sheds to house his tractors and other farm implements. However, most of the time he

lived with his family in a small flat in a middle class locality in Indore. His daughter was studying to become a doctor in a medical college. Chauhan had completed a law degree himself and only went back to farming in the village because there was no one else to manage the lands. I was told that almost everyone in the village of about 300 people worked for him in some capacity or other.

Birendra Singh Pawar was a young farmer in his twenties who idolized Omkar Singh Chauhan and wanted to become like him. When I met him for the first time, he looked well-groomed, dressed in a shirt and pants, with neatly combed hair. His family farmed 500 bigha (about 100 hectares) out of 1200 bigha and owned 6 out of the 14 tractors in their village in Dewas district. His father had completed a Bachelor of Science degree and returned to the village in 1971. Birendra Singh started farming in the mid-1990s. He constantly communicated with scientists and always sought to learn new techniques about farming. He was keen to mechanize farm operations to the maximum extent possible yet he criticized scientists like Prof. Bhatnagar for pushing certain scientific methods of agriculture and denying the value of farmers' traditional methods such as '*dora*.'<sup>51</sup> He was building a two-storey bungalow in his village in 2006 but lived in the town of Dewas with his wife and two young children in a small single-storey house. His cousin was the secretary of the village Oilfed society.

Madho Singh Patel was also well-known in soyabean circles. He was an old farmer, possibly in his seventies and had been the *sarpanch* [headman] of his village in

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<sup>51</sup> A *dora* is a wooden or iron-made piece of equipment that is used for weeding. It usually has a small wheel with a long handle to roll it in between rows of soyabean while a sharp edge uproots weeds as it is pushed. A cycle-dora replaces the small wooden or iron wheel with a bicycle wheel and is much easier to use. A bullock-dora replaces the wheel with a long rope attached to a bullock and held by a person—the dora moves as the bullock moves forward (See Vinaygam et al. 2006).

Richa Kumar

Indore district. He was secretary of his village Oilfed society from 1986 to 1998 and in 2006 he was the Chairman of Malwa Seed Growing Organisation [*Beej Utpadan Samiti*] which is a cooperative society and runs a seed shop in the *mandi*. He had visited Chicago in 1995 as part of a three-member farmer group sponsored by the Soyabean Processors Association. He showed me pictures from his visit and I especially recall one where he is standing in front of a tractor with a wheel taller than his height.

Chauhan, Pawar and Patel are representative of the immigrant farming castes who settled down in western Madhya Pradesh between 150-200 years ago—the Rajputs from Rajasthan, the Marathas from Maharashtra, and the Patidars from Gujarat respectively. They are outstanding examples of “*acche kisan*” and were introduced to me as such by scientists and private processors. Laxminarayan Patidarji of Ujjain district, himself a “good farmer,” described the typical progressive evolution of such a farmer through the soyabean revolution:

“With soyabean’s money first of all farming was improved and second lifestyle standard went up because farmers bought tractors, vehicles, motor bikes etc. Sales of tractor increased the most....With soyabean money a farmer was able to dig tubewells, build a *pacca* house... The attraction [*rujhan*] towards implements led to more sowing. And implements came because of soyabean. ...Profit led to more dedication [*lagan*] on part of the farmer, his family got involved, and they tried their best to grow a good crop [*acchi phasal ka prayas kara*].”

Enacting the role of a good farmer meant growing a good crop. A good crop was consistently defined by state and market actors as one that gave the highest yield. The language of yield bound these farmers to agricultural scientists and seed companies. These farmers prided themselves on making all efforts to increase the yield of their crop but lamented the lack of support from government institutions in enabling higher increases that could potentially be possible. For instance, at a SOPA conference in

Indore's most-expensive Sayaji Hotel, Omkar Singh Chauhan questioned the Agricultural Production Commissioner and other government officials as to why there been a lull in creating new, higher-yielding soyabean varieties for the last decade or so, after the popular JS-335. Recounting the incident to me he said, as farmers we are creating new local varieties, I have made 3-4 myself, but these scientists are not able to come up with anything. Similarly, farmers blamed electricity department officials and agricultural department officials for not supplying electricity and fertilizers in sufficient quantities when required, especially during the sowing of wheat. How could they be expected to be "good farmers" if the government did not support them?

The farmers described above, who seek to become "good farmers," are powerful rural actors in their own right. They belong to the most economically well-off families in the village and may even hold some political office, whether it be in the village panchayat or the cooperative society. When development is narrowly framed as increasing production and productivity of agriculture, these economically and politically powerful rural actors are better able to fulfill the criteria of being "good farmers" because they have the resources to dig tubewells and irrigate their lands, buy good quality seeds, fertilizers and pesticides to improve the yield, and enough land to produce a large crop. Consequently, those who were already powerful within rural society have been able to ensure that the state continues to provide them with free electricity, enables timely provision of fertilizer, innovates and gives them new seed varieties, procures their crop at higher minimum support prices, helps them maintain their level of prosperity and protects them during times of distress (Varshney 1995, Gupta 1998). They have also made successful claims upon the state to continue to support them in the name of agrarian

development even after liberalization in 1991 (Varshney 1999). In Madhya Pradesh, under pressure from farmer lobbyists the state government pledged to waive all electricity bills of defaulters as well as increased the procurement price of wheat by an extra 100 rupees per quintal prior to the assembly elections in November 2008. However, in the name of helping all farmers, both these actions encouraged greater extraction of ground water and growing of more water-intensive wheat by farmers who were already economically better off. In effect, state policy subsidized richer farmers and supported their extractive practices related to soil and water management—a policy which can lead to a more severe ecological crisis than what Malwa is seeing already.

More problematically, the metaphor of “good farmers” has become a means for upper caste farmers to denigrate the rights of poor, lower caste, adivasi farmers to be farmers at all. In Madhya Pradesh, farmers who do not fulfill the criteria of being “good farmers” are usually small and marginal producers, mostly adivasi and lower caste. For state extension agents, such farmers are too poor and ignorant to be helped or reformed, while for neoliberal agribusinesses they produce too little and are incapable of improving their low levels of productivity to count much in the larger scheme of things. State planners in the past and market actors after liberalization have insisted upon enacting the narrative of transition on small and marginal farmers (and the landless agricultural workers) converting them into industrial or urban labourers.

During my visits with “*acche kisan*,” I asked them to introduce me to poor farmers who farmed small plots of land in their village. Repeatedly, they tried to dissuade me from meeting such farmers. “What will you learn from them,” they asked? “We have told you everything there is to know about soyabean. Those farmers don’t know about

new varieties and new techniques, they don't do farming correctly. They won't be able to tell you anything correctly for your research." I tried to get around this by suggesting that I wanted to learn about bullock farming and tractor farming—surely those farmers would be able to tell me more about bullock farming. But these farmers dismissed bullock farming as outdated and on the wane.

"Good farmers" often criticize the state for giving resources to such farmers through mechanisms of land redistribution or by providing subsidized farming equipment. Ramakant Patidar of Gopalkhedi village went to the extent of suggesting that these farmers should not be farmers. "The government wastes resources on them. Look at their land, madam," he said, as we were going through his village. I saw a patchy piece of land with short soyabean stalks looking weak and dried out next to the road. The patch had been given to an adivasi farmer during land redistribution 30 years ago. "They have spoilt the average [yield] from 5-6 quintal per bigha to 2-3 quintal per bigha," he lamented. Along with scientists, "*acche kisan*" displayed anxiety over the decline in average yields because poor adivasi farmers' low yields were also counted in the overall average calculation. In the context of constant evaluation on the basis of yields, they felt that the real productivity of agriculture would be revealed if we did not count such poor farmers.<sup>52</sup>

The following incident at the field of Champalal Singh Makwana of Ranipura village epitomizes this sentiment. At the soyabean harvest in 2007, almost a year and a

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<sup>52</sup> The land was originally government-owned wasteland and had been given to the adivasi farmer in a process of land redistribution during the 1970s. A new road was built a few months ago next to the land and the topsoil and mud from that field had been used in making the road. It was no surprise then that the soyabean looked like it was 10-15 days old even after two months. A nearby field of an upper caste farmer had been extended onto land owned by the government. He had allowed only a little portion to be denuded of mud. The adivasi had to make the sacrifice for the greater public good, whereas the upper caste farmer could get away without doing so.



half after I began fieldwork, I was at Champalal Singh's field when a Rajput farmer from the nearby village and who owned the field across the road from Champalal came up to us. I had never met him before and he asked about the purpose of my visit. I explained my interest in farming and soyabean. He said, "You compare my field and his. I have got 5 quintals per bigha and in another field it may even be 6 q/ bigha. He has 2 q/ bigha. 6 q in 3 bighas." The Rajput did not realize that Champalal farmed only one out of the three bighas he was seeing. Anyway, he continued, "He could have got 15 quintals in 3 bigha. He has lost 9 quintals or Rs 9000 at least [calculated using the minimum support price of soyabean at Rs. 1000 per quintal]. And his pesticide and fertilizer would not have cost so much." Even if we calculate for one bigha, Champalal Singh lost Rs. 3000 and a bottle of pesticide costs Rs. 450. I added that I had seen Baghelji, the *gram sevak* (village agricultural extension officer), giving the bottle at a subsidized rate of Rs. 250. Looking at Champalal I asked why couldn't you get it? Champalal's son Anil responded that "Motibai [Champalal's mother] had got some seeds and culture [plant vitamins] this year." When I mentioned Baghelji's name, the Rajput said, "He needs to go and meet Baghelji to get things. The well will not come to you. You have to go to the well to drink."

All this while Champalal Singh sat on the ground and didn't say anything much. The Rajput and I stood about 10 feet apart making him our topic of discussion. I asked generally, "Why not even get it [pesticide] from Dhar?" Before Champalal Singh could reply, the Rajput chimed in. "You need enough mental capacity to plan ahead. If you want to go to Dhar tomorrow you need to plan from today. Tomorrow if you get up and think you want to go, by then it is already 10 am and you wonder would it be available or

not in the shop. So you decide I will go tomorrow. Then something happens the next day and so they don't end up going. They do not do anything on time, whether it is sowing within the required three days, or it is giving pesticide and fertilizer on time. And by the time they cut the soyabean it has already shattered [*khir gai he*]. Luck/fate and deliberation both are needed [*Taqdeer aur tadbeer dono chahiye*]. Luck is god gifted and even if you wish to increase it you cannot. But where is the application of his mind [*Dimaag pata nahi kahan raheta hai*]? If he would have given the land on lease [*munafa*] it would have turned out better." Then the Rajput left.



Champalal Singh Makwana, his daughter, son, and three nephews sowing soyabean and maize by hand in Ranipura, June 2006. Photo by Richa Kumar

This analysis is typical of what most upper caste farmers and traders in places like Ranipura and Dhar believe about lower caste, adivasi farmers. The problem, they eloquently argue, is with the adivasis' mental inability to think, to make decisions, to act

upon them in a responsible manner. But such an evaluation creates a caricature out of the actual lived circumstances of people like Champalal Singh and obscures the unequal power relationships that circumscribe his life. Champalal Singh was around 36 years old in 2006 when I met him first. He was at his field on the main road coming from Ranipura to the highway. Five children between 7 and 12 years of age were with him planting maize and soyabean by hand. The children, I later learnt, were Champalal's two children and three nephews. They were poking a hole in the ground with their little fingers and dropping seeds into them. Using a little stick they were trying to draw a 10 feet straight line from the last hole where they planted a seed. Champalal said that the tractor fellow missed out about 5 feet of rows at the end of his field so he was taking the help of these kids to finish the sowing by hand. But the holes made by the children ended up all over the place, definitely not in a straight line and only 6-8 inches apart rather than the 2 feet norm. Moreover, the kids were doing a pretty lousy job of sowing, dropping too many seeds into one hole! They didn't seem to know about the techniques but they were enjoying themselves thoroughly. Champalal Singh wasn't paying much attention to them either. I had spent the past three days observing farmers sowing by bullock cart and by tractor and had discussed the seed rate and spacing of plants with many of them. So I instinctively interrupted the kids saying you are putting too much seed, how will the plant sprout well? So then Champalal Singh became slightly more alert and started showing them how to plant.



Left: Champalal Singh's field showing the hand-sown portion. Right: The field on the opposite side of the road (referred to by the Rajput). Photos taken in July 2006 by Richa Kumar

Champalal Singh and his brothers, the sons of Savitri bai, are amongst the poorest families in Ranipura village. Each of them has one quarter to one half hectare of land, obtained when their father's 2-3 hectares was divided at his death. Savitri bai had seven sons and three daughters. Her nieces joked that she did not get the benefit of birth control methods during her time. One son disappeared as a teenager and one daughter died leaving behind a two-year old boy. All remaining six sons were yearly labourers at the houses of Jat farmers in the past, although two of them (Champalal and Raju) quit because of medical problems. A third expired due to some illness leaving behind his wife and three young children. None of the brothers have a tubewell in their fields (the one field with a tubewell has been leased out to the priest of Ranipura), but they grow unirrigated wheat in *rabi* and soyabean in *kharif*.

Champalal said he had studied till the 3<sup>rd</sup> standard but could not remember anything. He had been a yearly servant [*hali*] at the houses of two Jat brothers in Ranipura for nearly 10 years but left the job a few years ago. He recalled that he was spraying pesticide for them and fell sick some 6-7 years ago. I asked whether he took any

precautions or safety measures. He replied, “They gave soap to wash. But by mistake I think I may have taken water or food with unwashed hands. But mostly it is the gas that comes into your mouth when you spray.” Every month or two months, Champalal would stop getting any sensation in his entire body, almost like paralysis. I asked him whether he went to a doctor or what medicines he took. He said “I have a slip [*parchi*] from the doctor; you see it and tell me. The medicines are very expensive, five rupees a tablet. I only have them when I become very sick.” On my next visit to his house, he showed me a worn slip of paper. Below a scrawled date of 2002, the doctor had written “schizophrenic psychosis.” I don’t think Champalal quite understood the import of his disease nor the possible implications that he could be sick for life. He had never visited the doctor after that date. It was also unclear whether his diagnoses was accurate or not.

Two months later in September 2006, Champalal’s five feet of hand planted soyabean and maize was definitely a sight to see. Because it had rained a lot, he told me, he wasn’t able to pull out the extra maize stalks which had sprouted up. There were too many plants, he had not put fertilizer in the hand sown maize and the plants were short and stunted with yellowing leaves and no potential corn cob mustaches [*mooch*] whatsoever! The soyabean didn’t look much better. The stalks were short and thin, the leaves were small and limp, and even the tractor-sown area was sparsely populated. It was an odd lot along the main road to Ranipura. Left, right, behind, and opposite this field, lush green stems swayed in the breeze every time I passed by.

Champalal told me that he did not have enough money to put fertilizer in the maize nor to buy pesticide for the soyabean. The field sloped away from the road but the water never drained out completely. It would simply accumulate in the low lying areas of

the field for days together, rotting whatever little crop that was standing. Soyabean, despite being able to withstand water logging for extended periods of time, did not do well in Champalal's field, one important reason being the soil had very low fertility [*urvarak shakti*]. In comparison, the Jat families for whom Champalal and his four brothers worked, all had between 5 and 20 hectares of land, and each had ensured that every year the soil fertility in select fields would be replenished with several trolleys of mud. The mud mostly came from the dry bed of the village pond during the summer months. Other farmers, such as the Rajputs, who did not have tractors or the ability to add mud, instead used their bullock carts to add cow dung fertilizer. Farmers like Champalal and his brothers did not have enough animals to generate sufficient cow dung for their fields. Champalal owned a cow and a calf and most of the cowdung was used up as cooking fuel.

At the soyabean harvest, the few pods on Champalal's field were small and withered. I counted not more than 10-15 pods on each stem where the usual would be at least 30-35 and a good crop would have 60-70 pods. He obtained just about 2 quintals in one bigha, when most other farmers in Ranipura got between 3-4 quintals, the best turning out to be 5 quintals in a couple of fields. Champalal and his family left for his in-law's place for Diwali, just after harvest and they left the unthreshed pile of soyabean at their field itself. Unfortunately, when they came back after six days, they saw someone had stolen all their soyabean, threshed it 100 metres away behind a tree and camped off [*chor koot ke le gaye*].

Based on this extended context, it is clear that Champalal Singh has inherited a tiny plot of land from his father. He does not own enough animals to provide animal

fertilizer to improve the soil quality of his fields. He does not have a bullock cart or farming implements and has to borrow them from others once their own farming operations are over, delaying his work. He is unable to add mud to the field to level the slope and reduce the extent of water logging. Further, he suffers from a serious illness, possibly caused by pesticide poisoning, and has no money to pay for medication and doctors' visits. Consequently, he is sick much of the time. Yet none of these circumstances are visible when we see the soyabean on his field. What is worse, he has no recourse to any support or compensation upon the loss of his entire crop to theft.

Back to the 2007 harvest: After the Rajput left, I asked Champalal whether the Rajput was correct in his statements. While he was there Champalal had turned his head away and generally agreed with a laugh and "hmph" with the Rajput. But when I asked he said, "These persons talk this way only. They suppress poor people this way only. They do not know the helplessness of the poor [*Yeh log aise hi bolte hain, aise hi gareeb ko dabate hain. Inko kya maloom garib ki majboori kya hai*]. I asked why the situation was helpless. He said,

"We go work as labourers. We do not come to know when Baghelji is coming. Sometimes we are on this field, sometime another field. These persons [Rajputs] take everything from Baghelji. It does not reach us at all. They [Rajputs] also must be giving [some inducement] to the village agricultural extension officer [Baghelji]. We do not have anything to give. Everything happens with arrangements under the table. [*Hum mazdoori jate hain. Pata nahi chalta kab Baghelji aa rahe hain. Hum kabhi is khet pe kabhi us pe. Yeh log Baghelji se sab le lete hain. Humare tak pahunchta hi nahin. Yeh bhi dete honge kuch gram sevak ko. Humare paas kuch dene ke liye hai hi nahi. Sab upar upar hi ho jata hai.*]"

Then I responded, "But last July I met Manguji and Rama bai [adivasis] and others at the nursery going to Jhumki to get seeds and some other agricultural equipment. They had got information from Baghelji." So then Champalal replied, "They must have a *pauti* (land record in their name). I have heard that one needs a *pauti* for this and our land is all

in the name of our mother. So Ram Prasad [his brother who takes care of their mother] may know about it.” Anil, Champalal’s son again reminded us that, “Motibai [Champalal’s mother] had got some seeds and culture this year.”

So, not only does Champalal Singh find it difficult to pay for subsidized pesticides and fertilizers, he is not eligible to receive government benefits because he does not have land in his own name, yet.<sup>53</sup> He is structurally excluded from even aspiring to join the category of “*acche kisan*” by his low caste, by his economic endowment, by his (il)legal status, and by his physical (in)ability amongst other things. By suggesting that farmers like Champalal Singh should not farm anymore because they can never become productive, modern farmers, their right to grow food such as vegetables in *kharif* and unirrigated wheat in *rabi* to feed themselves is also denied as a result. It legitimizes their forced transition into the growing numbers of landless, migrant workers and the subsequent pauperization that such a life entails (Breman 2007).

## Conclusion

The metaphor of a “good farmer,” which articulates an imagined scientific and technologically progressive farmer bringing about development through higher productivity, has been used effectively by rich farmers and state policy makers to frame agrarian change narrowly as a technical question. In doing so, they have obscured unequal power relationships that circumscribe farm practices and enforce differences amongst farmers. This has reinforced the power of the rural economic and political elite to seek support from both state and market actors and disempowered those who are weak

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<sup>53</sup> The relationship between the village agricultural extension officer and marginal adivasi farmers is discussed in greater detail in chapter three.



and powerless. Those who are already powerful are able to utilize the metaphor of “good farmers” to make claims upon the state to develop them through the provision of new agricultural technologies. The state is obligated to fulfill these claims because “good farmers” are the ones who are ostensibly making agriculture (and the nation) developed. But in the process, poor rural dwellers are further disenfranchised and denied access to the language of entitlements—for land, livelihoods, and subsistence—altogether. Partha Chatterjee’s framework of political society must be mapped onto this rural milieu with utmost care and concern, lest it glorify the actions of the rural elite at the expense of the poor and the weak.

Soyabean’s story is the story of a crop that brought double cropping to Malwa, that creating rising incomes and brought monetary prosperity. The *pacca* houses, televisions, motorcycles, agricultural implements, tubewells and motors, tractors, and harvesters, are all testaments to this transformation, which has been labeled as the yellow revolution and the credit for which has been appropriated by the state. However, soyabean did not come as a filler for empty space in the crop cycle of Malwa but replaced crucial water management practices that were central to this dryland plateau region of western Madhya Pradesh. The ensuing acute water scarcity and regular uncertainties in agrarian production puncture the progressive, linear narrative of the yellow revolution.

In this chapter I have argued for rethinking agrarian change as a result of the contingent imbrication of various human and non-human actors rather than a triumphant teleological narrative of state-led development. I also suggest that we foreground farmers’ narratives which treat change as non-linear and inclusive of the possibility of prosperity as much as decline. Further, the dominant vision of agrarian development as

higher production and greater productivity has reframed agrarian change into making “good farmers” and bringing about the development of the nation. Using metaphors such as “good farmers,” which embody a trajectory of making farmer into citizens, rural elites have been able to appropriate a greater share of the state’s resources for their own well-being and reinforce their power. At the same time, they have used it as a means to legitimize the exit of poor, low caste, marginal farmers from agriculture altogether, consequently denying the latter even the right to subsistence from the land.

## Chapter Two

### **“Empowering” Farmers in the Soyabean Marketplace: Misleading Expectations from Information Technology**

In June 2008, the New York Times published an article which began as follows: “Whether it’s for an Armani-suited Wall Street trader or a farmer in rural India, the right information at the right time is the baseline for success.” The article was describing a project to provide market price information to farmers in rural India using mobile phones via a text-messaging service. Anecdotal evidence suggested that a soyabean farmer from Maharashtra in central India, made 400 rupees more per quintal by waiting to sell his crop based on information received from this service. The project was hailed as an example of how information can empower farmers in agrarian markets (Arango 2008). Dr. Ashok Jhunjhunwala, Professor of Electrical Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai would have agreed with this assessment. He had proclaimed during a presentation at the e-Development conference at the MIT Media Lab in Cambridge, USA, in October 2000, “Information is power.” I was a final year undergraduate in the US at the time and had conducted fieldwork at TARAhaat that summer, one of the earliest development projects setting up computer and internet centres in rural India. Prof. Jhunjhunwala’s talk was inspiring enough to convince me to go and work with his company n-Logue Communications, to “empower” villagers in India with information on government schemes, agricultural best practices, and education, using latest information technology.

In the late 1990s, the dotcom bubble had not yet burst, India was slowly growing into an information technology (IT) hub, and there was a sudden interest in using information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially computers and the internet in promoting rural development. The World Bank's World Development Report for 1998-99 was entitled "Knowledge for Development" and started out by saying, "Poor countries—and poor people—differ from rich ones not only because they have less capital but because they have less knowledge" (Dahlman 1998:1). If only the poor knew how to farm better, they would become more productive farmers. If only the poor knew how to save their children from diarrhoea using oral rehydration therapy, there would be less infant mortality. Sweeping aside the complexity of disease, sanitation, affordability and access to nutritive food and medical aid, the problem of development looked deceptively simple—let experts in the west and in urban areas provide access to information and the rural poor would be able to save themselves from their own ignorance.

The first assumption underlying the statements of both Dr. Jhunjhunwala and the World Bank is that the poor lack information or have less knowledge. The second assumption is that providing the poor with a certain kind of information or knowledge will empower them and bring about development. The emphasis upon knowledge or information as the primary constraint in enabling development reformatted the problems facing the poor into issues of access to technology. In an environment where the information technology industry in India grew phenomenally over the last decade, such an approach found solutions to the problem of access by the dime a dozen. Projects like Mission 2007 which purported to establish internet kiosks in 100,000 Indian villages or

the 100\$ laptop of Nicholas Negroponte of the MIT Media Lab or Drishtee, TARAhaat, Akshaya, and many others, became institutional mechanisms supported by public and private funding for promoting access to technology.<sup>1</sup>

ITC-IBD, India's largest agribusiness and a division of the India Tobacco Company (ITC) adapted this notion in its analysis of the problems plaguing the agricultural marketing system of soyabean in Madhya Pradesh towards the end of the 1990s. It argued that farmers did not have adequate and reliable information on the price of their produce. Because of poor rural infrastructure in transportation and communications, farmers were dependent upon intermediaries for information and for transporting their produce to market yards and processing factories. Such intermediaries, argued ITC-IBD, were able to make a higher profit by denying farmers accurate information on prices and paying them a lower price. After careful analysis, the company came up with a project known as *eChoupal*, whereby information technology through internet kiosks in villages would be used to provide farmers with accurate price information collected from market yards and the company's own price quotes. This, argued ITC-IBD, would empower farmers to make an informed choice on where to sell their produce and improve their incomes. The company was expected to benefit through increased procurement and reduced transaction costs, thus, increasing shareholder value at the same time as benefiting the farming community (Deveshwar 2002, Annamalai and Rao 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> For descriptions of services provided using ICTs by these projects and an analysis of usage by villagers of such services, see Kumar 2001, Singh 2004, Kumar 2005a, Kiran 2005, Mission 2007 Secretariat 2005, Hamm and Smith 2008.

The *eChoupal* instantly became popular amongst development agencies in India and abroad, winning several ICT for development awards in the corporate social responsibility category.<sup>2</sup> Even though by 2005, most ICT projects were floundering, the *eChoupal* was consistently hailed as the lone success story in using information technology to bring about rural development. Failure of a majority of ICT for development projects did not prompt questioning of the assumption that information is empowering. Rather, critics argued that projects failed because relevant information had not been provided through the available technology (Balaji 2005). The *eChoupal* succeeded, critics claimed, because price information was critically important to the marketing of agricultural produce and brought direct benefits to farmers (Banerjee 2005, Panigrahy 2006).

In contrast, this research points towards several conceptual problems inherent in this discourse of empowering farmers through technology-promoted disintermediation and provision of market information. First, by reducing the frame of analysis to the moment of decision-making when farmers decide to sell their produce, the notion of empowerment is reduced solely to the act of being able to obtain a higher price. This narrow frame of analysis assumes that obtaining information automatically enables a farmer to receive the monetary benefits associated with that information. Agrarian markets are structured such that the price of any produce finally realised by each individual farmer is critically dependent upon the quality of the produce and who has the power to make the decision regarding quality. Further, simply providing price

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<sup>2</sup> The *eChoupals* project have won the following development related awards, among many others: Development Gateway Award 2005, TERI Award for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) 2004, the Stockholm Challenge Award 2006, United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) Award at the international conference on Sharing Innovative Agribusiness Solutions 2008. See [http://www.itcportal.com/sets/echoupal\\_frameset.htm](http://www.itcportal.com/sets/echoupal_frameset.htm) for more details.

information of far away markets is unhelpful unless a farmer has the ability to realise that price. For that, a farmer needs to be able to afford to transport his or her produce to that place and find a buyer willing to buy at that price, activities that cost both time and money. Additionally, this discourse does not differentiate between farmers and their own ability to obtain market information. Those who live closer to market yards have multiple sources of obtaining price information compared to those who live further away, regardless of whether they are rich or poor, literate or illiterate. Those who are poor, however, have comparatively less financial ability to be able to take advantage of such market information even if they live close enough to a market yard and almost no ability at all if they live farther away.

Second, focusing on the notion of *disintermediation*, or removing middlemen from the supply chain between farmers and consumers, through information technology draws attention away from the fact that disintermediation in a commodity like soyabean, which is a cash crop, is not possible. Without intermediaries to buy the soyabean from them and processing companies to process it and export it, farmers will be stuck with a product they cannot consume nor sell locally. I argue that rather than disintermediating or reducing the number of intermediaries in the supply chain, the *eChoupals* are, in effect, creating a system of private intermediaries beholden to a single company to compete with independent intermediaries who purchase soyabean for all processing companies in general. ITC-IBD argues that disintermediation is taking place because its private intermediaries do not have the power to make judgements on the quality of a farmers' crop and settle the final price for farmers. However, this obscures the fact that the power to settle the final price, in the new arrangement, shifts from a fairly competitive auction

between many traders in a market yard to a single employee of the company at the company's hub. Ironically, despite all the emphasis on prices, the difference between these two marketplaces is not on the price of soyabean offered to farmers but rather on non-price elements of competition, such as accurate weighing, on-time payment in cash, and respectful treatment of farmers.

Third, this discourse of technology-promoted empowerment diverts attention away from larger processes of disempowerment that are functioning in agrarian markets of cash crops like soyabean. Soyabean is a global commodity whose price in India is, in fact, driven not by ITC-IBD or the market yards, but by the Chicago Board of Trade and the Kuala Lumpur Commodities Exchange. All soyabean-related entities in India, whether processing companies, traders, or exporters are price-receivers with no ability to influence its price. Unlike a commodity like wheat, where farmers in India have consistently been able to lobby the government for increasing the minimum support price each year, and have obtained direct benefits through higher procurement prices in some areas, in soyabean, farmers have no power whatsoever in influencing the price.

Fourth, it is a myth to consider the *eChoupal* as an ICT intervention bringing about rural development. The computers and internet established by ITC-IBD do not play any role in enabling farmers to sell their soyabean to the company. In most cases, they are not even the primary source of information on soyabean prices, especially when the telephone is a convenient alternative. These computers have instead been installed in the homes of relatively better off farmers from the dominant caste in most villages and have become means of personal entertainment or communication for these families, in the select places where they are actually being used. While this promotes access to computers



for the families of the 6000 *sanchalaks* [computer operators] of ITC-IBD, it is not clear whether the village in general is benefiting at all, either from access to the machine itself for learning how to use computers or the internet, or from getting any benefits from the information beamed to these places by ITC-IBD, a fact which the company has itself acknowledged (Sivakumar 2007).

Finally, this discourse mistakenly equates the actions of traders in the marketplace whose aim is to maximize profits over the course of a season of buying and selling produce with the actions of farmers who are, in fact, motivated by concerns other than maximizing the price they obtain for their cash crops every season. Farmers are expected to make informed choices about when to sell their soyabean in an effort to maximize the price. In contrast, I argue that rather than maximizing the price of their crop over the entire season or year, as traders would naturally be expected to do, farmers, instead, try to maximize their savings in the form of stored commodities such as soyabean. Farmers would rather have stored goods than cash because cash is more easily alienated to others within the family or in kinship networks through claims of dependents and requests for loans. In places like Ranipura, farmers, whether rich or poor, large or small, sold their soyabean only when they required cash to conduct transactions.<sup>3</sup>

Although I also started out seduced by the ephemeral vision of empowerment through information technology, this research challenged these assumptions. In depth fieldwork, instead, suggested the need to explore alternative ways in which soyabean farmers in Malwa attempt to exercise power in the marketplace. Farmers engage with

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<sup>3</sup> James Ferguson (1994) makes a similar observation about cattle in Lesotho but he also analyzes their value in cultural terms, such as being a stand-in for the wealth and status of migrant young men. My argument here is restricted to the value of commodities such as soyabean as a means of saving.

intermediaries both at the market yard and at the *eChoupal* in battles over deciding the quality of their produce, in negotiations over the weight of their soyabean, and in playing off one marketplace against another. The misguided focus exclusively on technology detracts from understanding these alternative arenas of power struggles and prevents moving of resources to genuinely support farmers in these contestations over power in the marketplace.

### **Establishment of the *eChoupals***

The *choupal* is a public meeting place in a village, usually underneath a large, shady banyan tree. *eChoupal* is the name of an internet centre established by ITC-IBD in the house of a farmer in a village. Nearly 1700 villages in Madhya Pradesh and 6000 villages across India had such *eChoupals* as of 2007 (Fairless 2007). The name *eChoupal* reflects an attempt to make the centre an alternative place for meeting and sharing information using modern information and communication technologies (ICTs). In Madhya Pradesh, these *eChoupals* are known as *soyachoupals* because ITC-IBD first established them to buy soyabean from farmers.<sup>4</sup> ITC-IBD installed computers and internet access with battery backup in every *eChoupal*, selecting a room with a *pacca* [concrete] roof and strong walls in the house of a farmer who was called the *sanchalak* (information provider).<sup>5</sup> ITC-IBD selected only those persons owning a telephone as *sanchalaks* to enable communication of price information when the internet was not

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<sup>4</sup> This research refers to the *soyachoupals* only, although it uses *choupal*, *soyachoupal* and *eChoupal* interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> Most *eChoupals* faced long power cuts and electricity was available only for a few hours everyday. Along with the computer and a satellite dish (VSAT) the company provided two uninterrupted power supply units (UPS) with two solar panels and battery backup so that the computer and VSAT could be utilized even when there was no electricity. Peripherals such as a printer, mouse, keyboard, and monitor were also installed.

available or the computer had a technical breakdown.<sup>6</sup> The *sanchalak* was trained by the engineers who installed the system and taught how to access the *soyachoupal* website of ITC-IBD. Through the *eChoupal* in the village, ITC-IBD provided farmers with their company's purchase price for the produce. The *sanchalak* gave information to farmers and helped them take their soyabean directly to ITC-IBD's warehouse, bypassing intermediaries in the market yard altogether. At the warehouse, which came to be called the *choupal* by farmers, a company official would judge the quality and settle the price for each farmer. At the same warehouse, ITC-IBD built rural retail malls, known as *Choupal Sagars*,<sup>7</sup> to sell agricultural inputs and consumer goods to farmers, converting it into a private market yard in competition with the government-owned market yard known as the *mandi*.

Madhya Pradesh is the largest producer of soyabean in India. There are a few big processing companies such as Ruchi Soya, ITC-IBD, Malwa Vanaspati, Prestige Industries, and Gujarat Ambuja (in neighbouring Gujarat), along with several hundreds of smaller soyabean processors in the state. ITC-IBD is one of the largest buyers of

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<sup>6</sup> ITC-IBD sought to identify a male farmer with a medium-size landholding, who lived in a *pacca* house, owned a telephone, and was from the dominant caste of the village. He was expected to be influential in the village so he could convince farmers to sell to ITC-IBD. At the same time, he was required to be neutral (i.e. apolitical) so he would not get embroiled in local conflicts. The most obvious restrictive element of this list was the *pacca* house and telephone. Most phones in Malwa were in houses of the wealthiest families in the village in 2003 when I first conducted my field research, and the mobile phone revolution did not occur until 2006-07, when all the *eChoupals* in Madhya Pradesh had long been established. Further, most adivasis were typically poor and were usually not the "dominant" caste in the village (See Srinivas (1987) for a discussion of the "dominant" caste). So even though they formed a majority in many villages, no one from their community could fulfil the criteria to become a *sanchalak*. The choices for a *sanchalak* would remain between leaders of powerful political or social groups within the village.

<sup>7</sup> The company proposed a two-way, rural transportation/distribution network (independent of the *mandis* and the existing retail network) where it would directly buy agricultural produce from farmers as well as sell agricultural inputs, consumer goods, and services to farmers through the same network. As part of the retail distribution network ITC-IBD supplied fast moving consumer goods such as tea, biscuits, matches, salt, bulbs etc., to the *sanchalak* in the village who further sold them to local shops and other customers. In Sehore district where the mall started in 2005, the retail network in villages was just picking up. In Dhar district, the *Choupal Sagar* only started in October 2007 and the retail network was not very well developed yet.

soyabean in MP, although Ruchi Soya has had the highest market share. There are about 60 major (A- and B-class) government-owned market yards<sup>8</sup> in the state and ITC-IBD setup 44 warehouses to compete with them by 2005.<sup>9</sup>

The government-owned market yards were created through the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Act of 1972. From pre-colonial times till nearly the 1960s, when road infrastructure was non-existent and the only affordable mode of transportation was horse carriages or bullock carts, only a handful of farmers were able to take their produce outside the village to buyers in town. Most of them relied on traders who picked up produce from their door step and at the same time supported their production activities through loans—the classical interlinked markets described by economists (Harriss-White 1999). Activities of such moneylenders-cum-traders were opaque, often cryptic to illiterate farmers, and the relationship between them was one of power and control over farmers. David Hardiman (1996) has documented the relationships between farmers and intermediaries in colonial Gujarat and the power they held over farmers.

The institution of the *mandi* by the government in the post-independence period was created to reign in the power of intermediaries and bring transparency in the settling of prices for farm produce. All marketing transactions were to take place only within the premises of the *mandi*, which was established in a place officially designated by the

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<sup>8</sup> There are A, B, and C class *mandis* with A-class *mandis* being most competitive and having 15-20 traders participate in the auction each day. B and C class *mandis* are not very competitive and farmers far away from an A class *mandi* prefer not to sell their produce at these smaller *mandis*. These smaller *mandis* are usually the sites for corruption and traders have licenses in these *mandis* but are buying directly in the villages, illegally. Further research is required in this area to understand the functioning of smaller *mandis* and suggest methods to make them more accountable to the farmer.

<sup>9</sup> See the Madhya Pradesh *Mandi* Board website at <http://www.mpmandiboard.com/imajorcommE.asp> Accessed December 20, 2008 and <http://finance.indiamart.com/markets/commodity/soyabean.html> Accessed November 21, 2007.

government. Farmers had to bring their produce to the *mandi* where it would be auctioned, weighed and moved to the traders' shops by government-licensed weighers [*tulaavatis*] and labourers. Traders and erstwhile brokers had to pay a fee to the government to obtain a license to bid in the auction and buy produce from farmers. No weighing or transactions could be concluded at the traders' shop outside the *mandi*.<sup>10</sup>

The implementation of the *mandi* system in the 1970s led to the transformation of the role of the middleman according to Arvind Sardanha (2005), who conducted research on the historical role of the *mandi* system for Eklavya, an NGO working on education in Madhya Pradesh. The important distinction was that produce was sold in an open auction where traders would shout out bids for a given farmer's produce and it would be sold to the highest bidder. Further, legally payment was guaranteed by an external body, the *Mandi* Board at the state level and the *Mandi* Committee at the level of each *mandi*. The *Mandi* committee consisted of elected officials from the trading and farming communities who resolved disputes. Government officials also monitored the practices of traders within the *mandi* and supervised the weighing and the payment of *mandi* tax. According to Sardanha, "Earlier middlemen came to the village and picked up produce at a very big margin. They would tell farmers 'you don't know what will happen in the *mandi*, someone may cheat you, your *maal* [produce] may be stolen, sell it here only' [*loot lega, chori ho jayega, yahin bech doh*]. But the *mandi* was much more fair. It changed the entire system. Going to the *mandi* became much more common."

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<sup>10</sup> Maniramji Kankaria, an erstwhile *munim* (accountant) of a trader in Dhar *mandi* and now a proprietor of his own trading firm, thanks to soyabean, recounted the history of the *mandi*. The *mandi* was earlier in Dushera Maidan, an area on the outskirts of Dhar. In 1979 it shifted out of there to the Moti Bagh Chowk, its present location. The chowk was part of the palatial gardens of the Dhar Maharaj, Anand Rao Pawar. "It was a huge *bagicha* [garden] with more than 100 *chikoo* and sandalwood trees and a library." Interview, February 25, 2007. According to *mandi* records, it was bought from the Maharaj for Rs. 200,000 in September 1978.

After liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991, several government committees were instituted to study agricultural markets and give recommendations to improve their efficiency.<sup>11</sup> In 2000, an Expert Committee on Strengthening and Developing Agricultural Marketing System in the Country (Shankarlal Guru Committee) was instituted by the Ministry of Agriculture. This committee suggested the promotion of privately organised market yards (such as the *eChoupals*) in competition with existing government-owned market yards (*mandis*) where farmers sold their produce (Acharya 2005). In May 2002, Madhya Pradesh amended the Agricultural Produce Marketing Act of 1972 to allow farmers to sell their produce outside the *mandi* at pre-approved private hubs. This allowed companies to set up a buying hub at their processing factory or any leased warehouse to buy from farmers directly, thus eliminating traders from the supply chain, and creating a network parallel to the *mandi* system.

ITC-IBD is the agribusiness division of the India Tobacco Company (ITC), and started purchasing, processing and exporting soyabean apart from many other agricultural commodities in 1990. The company explained the introduction of the *eChoupal* in 2000 as a post-liberalisation, post-WTO induced response of the company to inefficient agrarian markets controlled by corrupt intermediaries, and an over-regulating, licensing regime of the state.<sup>12</sup> One of the main export products of the company was soyabean meal and the *eChoupal* was an attempt to regain competitiveness in the export market of soyabean. The Chairman of ITC, in a speech to shareholders in 2002 said, “This model

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<sup>11</sup> These included the Expert Group on Agricultural Marketing (Acharya Committee) constituted by the Union Ministry of Rural Development in 1998 which recommended transferring the agricultural marketing division of the central government from the Ministry of Rural Development to the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). This was followed by the Guru Committee and then the Inter-Ministerial Task Force in July 2001 (Jain Committee). See Acharya 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with S. Sivakumar, CEO, ITC-IBD, Hyderabad, December 20, 2002.

[*eChoupal*]...is in conformity with the reforms recommended by the Shankarlal Guru Committee ...[for] inducing efficiency in the *mandi* [market yard] channel through competition” (Deveshwar 2002). ITC-IBD also expected to benefit through reduced procurement costs and by increasing its market share in the soyabean processing industry.

The reforms in agricultural marketing and the importance of the role of information technology can be traced to a shift in the last two decades towards neoliberal models of development whose stated primary purpose has been to make markets efficient, although they have had other effects.<sup>13</sup> David Harvey argues that the shift to neoliberalism is predicated upon the use of information technology to enable greater accumulation and dissemination of information and, consequently, enable efficient transactions in markets (2005). The World Bank considers enabling “flow of information” through ICTs to be “essential for effective markets” (Dahlman 1998: 2). Proponents of the *eChoupal* emphasized the role of intermediaries in blocking the flow of price information to farmers and argued that information technology could effectively overcome this inefficiency. According to ITC-IBD’s CEO Mr. S. Sivakumar, intermediaries added little by way of productive value but because they compensated for infrastructural constraints, they were entitled to some monetary share (Sivakumar 2002). Information technology was expected to reduce this share to the minimum possible by empowering farmers with price information and reducing the power of intermediaries to exploit their ignorance.

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<sup>13</sup> Shifts towards neoliberal models of development in parts of Latin America and southeast Asia had devastating effects on poor people in countries like Chile and Indonesia during the 1990s when real incomes reduced and poverty increased (Paley 2001, Harvey 2005).

### **Is Information Empowering?**

This research argues that information alone is not enough to “empower” farmers to automatically obtain the benefits that are supposed to be associated with it. Simply knowing average market yard price or ITC-IBD’s quoted price is unhelpful for an Indian soyabean farmer because these prices are for a given level of quality known as FAQ (Fair, Average Quality). A farmer can never know the exact price of his or her soyabean until it is physically evaluated and its quality determined in relation to the FAQ. The power to decide the quality is vested in the person buying the produce—either a group of market yard traders in the *mandi* auction, or ITC-IBD’s rate-setter at the warehouse, or a trader who comes to buy directly in the village. The determination of quality “inevitably depend[s] to a considerable degree on subjective judgement,” as William Cronon argued for grain in Chicago in the 1860s (Cronon 1991: 118).

With larger landholdings, standardized inputs, mechanized processes, and large marketing contracts, such as those in the United States, one can expect certain standardization in the quality of a large volume of output.<sup>14</sup> Unlike this industrialised form of agriculture, the nature of agricultural production in India, however, is not amenable to standardization of quality. Not only are farms small in size in comparison to the US and south America, they are further subdivided into multiple plots located far away from each other and, thus, having different soil fertilities and slopes. A farmer rarely farms contiguous plots of land and thus, soyabean from the same farmer would

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<sup>14</sup> Steven Stoll in his book, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage* describes the process of standardization of quality in the fruit industry in California and argues that it was a mutual shaping of the process by marketing requirements and technological choices. Unfortunately, standardization was only based on size and colour; it did not reflect qualities of juiciness and nutrition. Moreover, the problems with monocropping, pest attacks, and huge seasonal labour requirements led to unsustainable practices.



have some variation. The soyabean of an entire village would consist of a range of qualities and each farmer's amalgamated lot would be priced very differently depending upon its grade.

In Jharkheda village in Sehore district, for instance, rain had fallen in one part of the village and the soyabean there was growing well in July 2005, but in the other part where the *sanchalak* also had land, his crop was still waiting for water. He might amalgamate all his produce together and sell (to obtain a medium level of quality and generally recover his costs) or he may sell his good quality at a premium and forego the costs on his bad quality. Micro-level rainfall differences and variations in soil quality contributed significantly to soyabean quality even if the seed was the same, the same variety of fertilizers and pesticides were used, and the timing of weeding and harvesting was the same. Farmers in Ranipura village in Dhar district obtained different quality of soyabean from different parts of the same field, especially when part of the field remained waterlogged for extended periods of time, reducing the size and shine of the seed. For instance, the Panditji [priest] of Ranipura explained that every year he was always in a hurry and would sell as fast as possible. He would usually use the tractor of Sameer Singh Rathod to bring his soyabean to the Dhar *mandi*. "One year Panditji had got bags with grain of different quality and the trader yelled at us," said Sameer Singh. Traders expect farmers to mix their grain and bring one single quality so that it can be graded and priced accordingly. Panditji had simply bagged everything as it was from his different field plots and taken it to a trader outside the *mandi*. "I then begged the Seth [trader] and said please do it, this is our Panditji [village priest]," said Sameer Singh, and the trader finally relented.

Further, advertising market yard prices of far away places is not helpful unless farmers can afford the transportation to that place and find a willing buyer at that price—activities that cost time and money and require some contacts in the far away place. It is precisely these costs and efforts that intermediaries are supposed to help with. Information about any price, whether it is the minimum support price (MSP) instituted by the government, or the average market yard price in a distant *mandi*, or ITC-IBD's price at its warehouse does not automatically empower a farmer unless he or she has the ability to realise that price. Information about a potential price can give farmers a comparative frame within which to evaluate the price being offered by a local village trader or a trader at a market yard. But it can empower them only if they have the ability to obtain that price. For that, transportation costs should not be prohibitive to take away the entire expected profit and those costs should be affordable to the farmer. A farmer then needs to find a buyer willing to buy at that price, given the quality of the farmer's crop.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the discourse celebrating the need for new information technologies assumes that all farmers do not have any price information whatsoever. Farmers from villages situated in close proximity to a large A-class *mandi*, within 30 kilometres or so, find it easier to get information on *mandi* prices. Many farmers from such a village, like Ranipura in Dhar, would sell their produce at the *mandi* and many villagers would travel to the *mandi* town for work or education almost on a daily basis. They brought back news about the *mandi* prices of the day. Farmers who live in villages that are farther away from

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<sup>15</sup> The Minimum Support Price (MSP) instituted by the government also helps farmers only where the Food Corporation of India (FCI), NAFED or some other government agency is physically purchasing at that price and farmers are able to sell to them. In response, traders in the vicinity are forced to also increase their price of procurement to approximate the MSP, to remain in business. Simply advertising an MSP is of no use to farmers who cannot find a buyer at the price. Traders will undercut the MSP unless the FCI is a buyer in the same marketplace.

large, competitive *mandis* do not travel to the *mandi* town often. But they are still able to obtain information on prices through the telephone during the day or at the end of the day.<sup>16</sup> Several television channels now provide the day's *mandi* prices in tickers at the bottom of the screen and those who obtain newspapers are able to see the prices for the previous day. The local *mandi* price has become ubiquitous.

The *eChoupal* intervention was different from other ICT projects because it went beyond just providing price information to farmers. ITC-IBD established warehouses in the vicinity of every major *mandi* buying soyabean in Madhya Pradesh. Farmers who could afford to pay the transportation costs to the *mandi* could refuse to sell to a trader in their village and feasibly make a trip to ITC-IBD's warehouse to sell their soyabean.<sup>17</sup> Thus, ITC-IBD's quoted price had a definite transactional opportunity embodied within it, which could be realized by some farmers.

However, according to research conducted by Dr. Jaya Mehta, an independent academic based in Indore, of the 30-40 small farmers interviewed around Indore district, none had ever been to ITC's warehouse or the *mandi* although they were aware of the latter. With transport on a tractor being costly, small farmers with 2-5 bags to sell did so in the village itself. They found it prohibitively expensive to sell outside the village (Mehta 2005).<sup>18</sup> Thus, those farmers who could not afford to take their soyabean even to

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<sup>16</sup> The mobile phone has become immensely popular in the Madhya Pradesh since 2006 with several companies establishing networks and promoting cheap and popular schemes for buying handsets and SIM cards.

<sup>17</sup> In the past, ITC-IBD had paid farmers transportation costs (at the rate of 3-5 Rs. per quintal per kilometer) to bring their produce to the warehouse; but once warehouses were established in most soyabean growing districts, this practice was discontinued.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Jaya Mehta, Indore, March 28, 2006.

the *mandi* and were forced to sell to traders at the village, itself, were unable to take any advantage of knowing ITC-IBD's price.<sup>19</sup>

Mehta further argued that even if these small farmers, who produced less than 5-6 quintals each, pooled together their soyabean on one tractor trolley, each farmer's grain would warrant a different price depending on the quality. All the soyabean could not be mixed together. The farmer with better quality than others would not want his rate to be reduced by mixing his soyabean with others. In the large *Choupal Sagars* there was no provision to weigh a single bag. Hence, the trolley would have to be weighed five times, according to Mehta, which would be impractical for ITC-IBD's employees who would prefer to weigh it all at once. For this reason, small farmers could not sell their soyabean at ITC-IBD's warehouse according to Mehta.

Finally, the *eChoupal* also followed strict norms of quality.<sup>20</sup> ITC-IBD refused to buy soyabean that deviated significantly from the FAQ level of 2% foreign matter, 2% bad seed and 10% moisture. The worst level of quality that it accepted was 13% moisture, 7% foreign matter [*mitti*], 5% discoloured seed [*daagi*], and 10% green seed.<sup>21</sup> The *sanchalak* of Bhaunkhedi in Sehore district estimated during an interview in 2005 that out

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<sup>19</sup> According to Mehta's research, small farmers were unaware of the *eChoupals* if there was no *sanchalak* (or *choupal* agent as they were also known locally) in their village. Even if there was an *eChoupal* located 2 km away they, did not know about it. *Interview* in Indore, March 28, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> One of the explicit aims of ITC-IBD in establishing the *eChoupals* was to purchase better quality soyabean. Prior to the *eChoupals*, ITC-IBD would procure soyabean through traders in the *mandis* who would, according to ITC-IBD managers in Bhopal, traditionally buy batches of both very good and very bad quality produce, then mix them up before selling to companies like ITC-IBD for a higher overall margin. ITC-IBD would get lower level quality of soyabean, which upon processing yielded less oil and more contaminated de-oiled cake. According to traders in Dhar *mandi*, they would mix several qualities of soyabean to come up with a homogenous lot filling one truck load to make it easier to estimate the price of the entire lot and give some quality assurance to companies purchasing from them. Both sides agreed that this would generally provide companies with a lower average quality of soyabean. Through the *eChoupals*, however, soyabean comes loose in trolleys (usually belonging to a single farmer) without being mixed and bagged at the *mandi*. ITC-IBD managers claimed that soyabean purchased through the *eChoupals* had consistently been better in quality compared to the *mandi*-procured soyabean during interviews in 2003.

<sup>21</sup> *Interview with Deepak Pathak*, Manager of the ITC-IBD *choupal* in Dhar, October 28, 2006.

of 20 tractor trolleys that he directed to the ITC-IBD warehouse each day, at least 5 trolleys were rejected. Other *sanchalaks* corroborated that about 15-20% of trolleys were rejected by ITC-IBD each day. Thus, not every farmer could sell at the *eChoupal* even if he or she could afford the transportation costs—one had to ensure a certain minimum level of quality. Despite obtaining information about a potential price of soyabean, farmers were not automatically able to act upon the information to realise the potential benefits linked to it. Rather than fetishizing information, this research argues that the power relationships underlying market exchange need to be foregrounded in any analysis studying the presumed empowerment of farmers.

### **Disintermediation: A Misleading Expectation**

Disintermediation, or removing middlemen between producers and consumers, in a commodity like soyabean, which is a cash crop, is not possible. Soyabean farmers require intermediaries to connect them to processing companies and finally to consumers of their produce. Without intermediaries to buy the soyabean from them and processing companies to process it and export it, farmers will be stuck with a product they cannot consume nor sell locally. Intermediaries are an integral part of market exchange, precisely because information on potential buyers and sellers is not easily available in the physical domain.

The problem with intermediaries, according to ITC-IBD, was that they were taking away a greater share as profits than the actual value they added by transportation and other logistical support. They were necessary in the past to compensate for poor infrastructure and low connectivity and communications. With fragmented farms and small lot sizes of farm produce (less than 100 quintals or one truck size for a majority of

farmers) intermediaries played an important role in amalgamating and transporting a reasonable lot size to factories and ensuring homogeneous quality within that lot. But with the growth of rural infrastructure, ITC-IBD felt that the company could use information technology to directly connect with farmers and bypass as many intermediaries as possible.

However, ITC-IBD recognized that they could not do away with intermediaries entirely. Human intermediaries were still needed to fill infrastructural gaps related to transportation, especially to convince farmers in villages far away from market yards to transport their soyabean to ITC-IBD's warehouse. Hence, the model called for selecting an alternative set of intermediaries known as *sanchalaks* and *sanyojaks* to enable the transportation of farmers' produce to ITC-IBD's warehouses in various parts of Madhya Pradesh. The *sanchalak*, as described earlier, was chosen from the dominant caste of the village but was expected to serve all people in the village without prejudice. ITC-IBD made him (it was always a male farmer) take an oath in public which said that the computer infrastructure was a social good provided to the entire village by ITC-IBD and was not the personal property of the *sanchalak*. The *sanyojak* was a trader from the *mandi* who entered into a commission-based partnership with ITC-IBD to manage the warehouses and make payments to farmers.

These new intermediaries were expected to be less interested in profiteering from the system because of the better economic opportunities provided by ITC-IBD through a fixed commission on transactions undertaken through them and through various social constraints such as the public oath. The company argued that in their new position as *sanchalaks* and *sanyojaks*, these intermediaries would not have the power to decide the

quality of a farmers' soyabean and would not have the authority to settle the final price at the warehouse. That task would be conducted by an employee hired by ITC-IBD. Both *sanchalaks* and *sanyojaks* obtain their income through commissions paid by ITC-IBD to them for every ton of soyabean that is sold to the company through their village and warehouse.

According to ITC-IBD the *sanchalak* was expected to replace the village trader and enable farmers in bringing their soyabean to ITC-IBD's warehouse in tractor trolleys, where it would be finally graded and priced. When the smaller warehouse system was in operation, it became more accessible and affordable for farmers in distant villages to bring their soyabean to ITC-IBD with the help of the *sanchalak* as opposed to selling it to a village trader. Although the *sanchalak* did not have the authority to finalise the price for the villager, in practice, many *sanchalaks* were amalgamating soyabean in their village and bringing it to ITC-IBD's warehouse themselves. Despite knowing ITC-IBD's advertised price, the final price obtained by the farmer depended upon the desire of the *sanchalak* to communicate accurately the actual price given to the soyabean by the rate-setter at the warehouse.<sup>22</sup> The ability to do so would depend upon the power of the *sanchalak* in the village and the social relationship of the said farmer to the *sanchalak*. My research from 2003 shows that ITC-IBD's criteria for selecting *sanchalaks* is inherently biased towards selecting farmers who are already socially, economically, or politically powerful in the village. In some cases, *sanchalaks* are from the same caste, class, and families as erstwhile traders whom ITC-IBD aimed to disempower (Kumar 2005b).

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<sup>22</sup> Even though ITC-IBD and traders in the *mandi*, both gave receipts, the receipt can always "get" lost and illiterate farmers would, in any case, have to rely on the word of the *sanchalak*.

This research argues that the discourse of disintermediation by reducing the number of intermediaries draws attention away from the fact that ITC-IBD is, in effect, creating a system of private intermediaries beholden to a single company to compete with independent intermediaries in the *mandi* who purchase soyabean for all processing companies in general. In every A-class *mandi* such as Dhar *mandi*, 10-15 medium and large traders who are the top purchasers of soyabean conduct their business as commission agents (CAGs). CAGs already work on a commission basis with local processing companies just like the *sanyojaks*, and not on margins based on the difference between the price paid to farmers and that obtained from the company. In fact, ITC-IBD's local *sanyojak* in Dhar was the erstwhile CAG for the company in the local *mandi* and continued his business of purchasing soyabean and other produce in the *mandi* auction, even while working for ITC-IBD. The CAG system works competitively in Malwa because it is home to a large number of small and large soyabean processing plants, much of it excess and idle capacity created in the 1980s and 1990s. These plants are eager to purchase soyabean to keep the unit functioning for as many days in the year as possible and ensuring a steady supply of soyabean is the primary objective.

Despite claims of competing with intermediaries between the village and the market yard (i.e. village traders), ITC-IBD's *eChoupals* are essentially competing with intermediaries who participate in the A-class *mandis*. ITC-IBD's warehouses started out in locations with A- and B-class *mandis* in Madhya Pradesh and for a brief period from 2003-2006, they were established in smaller towns with C-class *mandis*.<sup>23</sup> The trend since

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<sup>23</sup> Some of these smaller warehouses, such as the one in Icchawar in Sehore district impacted the procurement of traders in the C-class Icchawar *mandi* quite significantly. However, ITC-IBD closed down the warehouse in 2005 when it opened the *Choupal Sagar* on the outskirts of Sehore town.



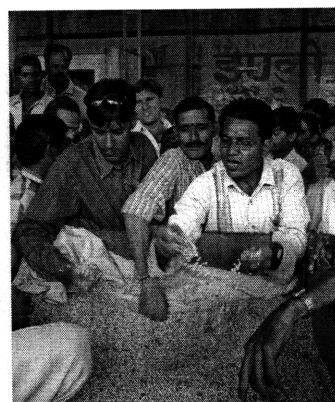
2006 has been to close down these smaller warehouses and expect all farmers to visit the *Choupal Sagars*, which are all established in competition with A-class *mandis* and also provide a channel for selling agricultural inputs, and other consumer goods and services to farmers.

Further, in contrast to assumptions that government-owned *mandis* are not competitive, this research argues that intermediaries participating in the large A-class *mandis* in Malwa such as in Dhar, Dewas, Indore, Sehore, and Ashta, for instance, are functioning in a competitive price environment organised through open cry auctions. In spite of several infrastructural problems plaguing the *mandi* system (Acharya 2005), it has created a competitive environment for marketing of agricultural produce. The A-class *mandis* do not function in the way characterised by neoliberal analysts who seek to set aside government regulation altogether (Panagariya 2008: 314-317, World Bank 2005). For instance, in October 2006 a new trading firm was launched in Dhar *mandi*—Mahageeta Traders, and Vignesh Rathod, one of the upper caste Rajput elders from Ranipura, was the main buyer. It turned out that the proprietor of the cloth shop where Vigneshji was an accountant for nearly 20 years in Dhar, had taken a *mandi* license. His aim was to buy the soyabean of farmers indebted to the cloth shop and thus recover the money.<sup>24</sup> The proprietor had asked Vigneshji to check out the *mandi* everyday to identify indebted farmers who had come to sell. He would bid only on trolleys where recovery was to be made, at times, even communicating to the *mandi* employee shouting out the bids that he was interested in the trolley. Nevertheless, even if Vigneshji was able to

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<sup>24</sup> The system of buying household goods and farm inputs, including fertilizers, pesticides, weedicides, etc., at shops in Dhar on credit and paying back at harvest has always been present. Seeds are usually obtained on credit (1.5 or 2 quintal to be returned for every quintal borrowed) from other farmers in the village or from relatives, usually wife's parents, in other villages.

subtly communicate to the auctioneer, the auction could not be influenced so easily. Small traders like Mahageeta had to contend with large buyers like Modiji, who were commission agents for companies and bought soyabean at whatever was the prevailing rate. They received their commission regardless of the price. In other words, even if Mahageeta traders wanted to recover debts, there was enough competition in the *mandi* to prevent them from getting away by bidding at below the prevailing market rate.



Left: Farmers from Ranipura sitting on a soyabean trolley in the *mandi* in October 2006.  
Right: Traders checking the quality of the soyabean in the trolley and participating in the auction.  
Photos by Richa Kumar

The *eChoupal* intervention is, in effect, replacing the competitive system of open cry auction between many intermediaries at the *mandi* who are buying for many processing companies with a single person who decides the quality and price for farmers and buys for ITC-IBD alone. Ironically, however, the competition between ITC-IBD and the market yard was not on the price of soyabean offered to farmers because ITC-IBD always set its price for the next day based upon the previous day's modal *mandi* price.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The modal rate in each market yard was decided based on the average price that soyabean sold for per quintal on a given day and comparing it to the modal price for that day. A rate reflecting both the average and the modal price was picked as the final modal rate for the day. Only the price of lots greater than 10

The unique selling point (USP) of the *eChoupal*, according to ITC-IBD, was that the FAQ price for the farmer would remain constant all day despite any fluctuations in the *mandi*. Thus, any variation between the two prices occurred when the *mandi* price fell or rose during the course of the day while ITC-IBD's price remained constant. On days when the *mandi* price rose above ITC-IBD's quoted price, the company increased its price by 11 am and possibly again by 3 pm to match up to the rising prices in the *mandi*, ultimately offering farmers a similar price bracket. But on days when the *mandi* price fell below the *eChoupal* price, farmers flocked to the *choupal*, and caused losses to ITC-IBD. On such days the price for ITC-IBD's soyabean meal would fall too, but the company would have to honour the higher fixed all-day price it had pledged to farmers for their soyabean meal.<sup>26</sup> From the perspective of farmers, the competition between the *mandi* and the *eChoupal* was focused generally not on gaining higher prices, but instead, on non-price elements of competition, such as accurate weighing, on-time payment in cash, and respectful treatment of farmers. These are discussed later on in this chapter.

### Global Networks of Disempowerment

The focus of the discussion on empowerment thus far has been on the actual "transaction" of farmers at the *mandi* or the *eChoupal*. This transaction needs to be contextualised in the broader setting of the global commodity chain of soyabean markets. This research argues that such a narrow frame removes from view larger processes of

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quintal was considered. The *mandi* secretary certified each day's rate and it was published on a board outside the *mandi* office as well as provided through online websites.

<sup>26</sup> The *mandi* price rose or fell because processing plants had increased or decreased their procurement price advertised to CAGs. Processing plants responded to various factors, especially the price of deoiled cake (soyabean meal) in the international market (where they exported it) and the price of edible oil. Since ITC-IBD was also a processor and exporter, it faced the same ups and downs of the market. When *mandi* prices fell, as a processor, ITC-IBD would ideally reduce its own procurement price, which it did in purchases outside the *eChoupal* network. But within the *eChoupal* system, the company was required to maintain the earlier, higher prices, and thus, incurred losses that day.

disempowerment that are functioning in agrarian markets. In the case of soyabean, these new market structures seek to empower farmers within a global commodity system that has already fundamentally disempowered them. Other than as a cash crop, soyabean is of no use to Indian farmers who do not eat it nor feed it to their animals, but instead grow it for meat-eating populations in other countries. The very act of choosing to grow soyabean means Indian farmers are inserting themselves into global networks of commodity flows and becoming part of a global chain linking them to soyabean producers in the United States and South America, to processors of soyabean around the world, and to consumers of beef in the countries of the Middle East and Japan. Each link in this global chain has a differentiated ability to influence the price but power is primarily centred on the commodity markets based in Chicago and Malaysia—the Chicago Board of Trade and the Kuala Lumpur Commodities Exchange. India's total soyabean production has never been more than 5% of global production. Hence domestic production shortfalls or increases do not have a significant influence on the global price of soyabean.

Ever since its introduction in Madhya Pradesh in the 1970s, most of India's soyabean was primarily exported for cattle feed after being processed into de-oiled cake (DOC or soyabean meal), whereas the oil resulting from the process was refined and sold domestically as cooking oil.<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, a system evolved whereby processing companies would contract with traders in the *mandi* to buy soyabean on their behalf.

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<sup>27</sup> In the early 1970s only two factories in Malwa, General Foods (Ruchi Soya) and Malwa Vanaspati used to buy soyabean. According to an old trader in Dhar *mandi* (Rameshji Jain) in 1986-87 most of the soyabean from Madhya Pradesh was sent to Gujarat. Solvent extraction plants (using hexane to extract the oil and process the leftover deoiled cake) meant for groundnut shifted to processing soyabean. Initially the capacity of the plants was 200-250 tons per day (TPD) whereas now plants are of 1500 TPD. In the 1990s, five processing plants were established exclusively for processing soyabean in Dhar district, in the areas of Ghatabilloid and Pithampur (the Special Economic Zone discussed in chapter four).

These traders were called commission agents (CAGs) and were responsible for transporting the goods to the company's warehouse or factory, and would receive a fixed commission in return. Plant managers provided traders in the *mandi* with the daily price for the delivery of one ton of soyabean to the factory premises. Traders bid in the *mandi* auction accordingly. They would invest their own money and pay farmers the same day and the company would reimburse all their costs within 7 to 10 days.

Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) prices, which reflected international production trends, were the baseline against which local prices were calculated by managers of processing plants. Factors such as existing inventory and unfulfilled orders, port delays, possible changes in import export duties, etc. would also influence the sale price of DOC for processing companies and exporters, and hence impact their procurement price for soyabean. During the domestic harvest in October excessive arrival of soyabean in the *mandis* would drive down procurement prices relative to international prices and in the lean season, prices would reign higher.

In the mid-1990s two new influences upon the price of soyabean emerged. First, India became a net importer of edible oil (today it imports between 50-60% of its requirements),<sup>28</sup> especially of large quantities of crude palm oil from Malaysia and Indonesia. Despite 300% import duty initially, palm oil became a cheap substitute for other edible oils, especially in the manufacture of *vanaspati* (hydrogenated oil), a very popular substitute for more expensive *ghee* (clarified butter). It exerted a major influence on the domestic price of edible oil. As import duty on palm oil changed, prices of

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<sup>28</sup> Import dependence of edible oils was 2-5% from 1961-75 and 36-47% from 1976-87. With the tightening of import restrictions it came down to 4 per cent in 1993. After liberalization in 1994, it rose steadily to over 50 per cent in 1999 and 2000. See Sekhar, C.S.C., "Agricultural Price Volatility in International and Indian Markets," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 23, 2004, p. 4733.

domestic edible oil would react. Any changes in the domestic price of oil would affect the price of soyabean, since soyabean oil was entirely sold in the domestic market.<sup>29</sup>

Second, the government allowed futures trade in oilseeds and the SOPA<sup>30</sup> Board of Trade (SBOT) was started in 1999 as an open cry soyabean oil futures exchange in Indore. Soya oil futures on SBOT took into account fluctuations in the price of palm oil, which was traded on the Kuala Lumpur Commodity Exchange (KLSE). SBOT prices started affecting *mandi* prices of soyabean during the course of the day, which in the past had been known to remain mostly steady throughout the day. Initially through landline telephones, information would be relayed to traders' shops in the *mandi* by processing plants who had revised their daily price by afternoon. A helper would run from the shop to the auction platform and inform the trader about price changes and the latter would change the bid accordingly. As mobile phones became more affordable in the mid-2000s, this impact became almost instantaneous.<sup>31</sup>

In this global commodity chain, traders in the market yard and the company officials of ITC-IBD are price receivers. They decide prices for farmers based upon a price they obtain from domestic processing plants, who in turn base their price upon the price of soyabean meal on the CBOT and the price of palm oil on the KLCE. When the global price of soyabean on CBOT goes up, farmers in Malwa get higher prices, as happened in 2007 thanks to the shift in soyabean acreage towards corn in the United

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Ravindra Mall, Manager, National Board of Trade, Indore, April 23, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Soyabean Processors Association of India (SOPA) Board of Trade was renamed National Board of Trade (NBOT) in 2001-2002.

<sup>31</sup> According to Maniram Kakaria, a very old trader in Dhar *mandi*, there was a time when telegrams would be sent from Indore to Dhar everyday informing the brokers at what rate their produce was sold to the plants. A two-rupee change in price from the previous day was considered to be a big deal. Sanjay Jain Chajjer, Ruchi Soya's commission agent added that with the onset of telephones a lightening call (for long distance calling) used to be booked to Indore to obtain rates. One person had to sit at the phone all the time because the call could come through anytime (Interview, Dhar *mandi*, Feb 24, 2007).

States. When soyabean prices on CBOT go down or the price of palm oil on the KLCE goes down, farmers in Malwa get lower returns regardless of how much it may have cost them to produce the crop.

In contrast to soyabean, farmers in India have the ability to directly influence the price of wheat. India is the second largest wheat producer in the world.<sup>32</sup> Almost all the wheat produced in India is consumed domestically and a small portion of it is purchased by the government at a minimum support price (MSP). This MSP is suggested by the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices, a body of experts in agricultural economics (Varshney 1995). But it is finally determined by the political party in power—which is open to influence by farmers' lobbies from the main wheat producing states of Punjab and Haryana, to increase the price every year. In 2005 the price was Rs. 650 a quintal, which increased to Rs. 850 in 2007 and Rs. 1000 in 2008. Farmers in Madhya Pradesh, too, benefited from the increased prices. Because wheat is sold domestically and because the government is an important buyer, farmers' organisations have been able to successfully lobby the increase in the minimum support price each year. But soyabean farmers have absolutely no influence at all on the price they receive. Participating in the global system means subordinating oneself to transnational forces of capital—and giving up the ability to influence price outcomes altogether.

### **Over-Hyped Potential of the Internet**

The *eChoupal* has been popularly regarded in development circles as an information technology project bringing about rural development. ITC-IBD undertook a

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<sup>32</sup> India produces about 11.5% of the world's wheat, next to China. See [http://nue.okstate.edu/Crop\\_Information/World\\_Wheat\\_Production.htm](http://nue.okstate.edu/Crop_Information/World_Wheat_Production.htm) for data from 2003 sourced from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.

very large investment in information technology infrastructure in rural India. As previously mentioned, there are computers and satellite dishes in 1700 villages in Madhya Pradesh and in 6000 villages in India (Fairless 2007). ITC-IBD developed a website known as *soyachoupal.com* which gave information on ITC-IBD's price for the next day, along with district level weather,<sup>33</sup> common pests and diseases, and a query section for questions related to agriculture sent to the local government agricultural college. The information was available in Hindi. Over a period of time, *sanchalaks* were taught how to use email as well as browse other websites such as the Madhya Pradesh *Mandi* Board and other government sites that gave information on historical market yard prices. ITC-IBD even experimented with different technologies for connectivity and various designs to make the *soyachoupal* website more user-friendly. It has developed a strong technical team to troubleshoot computers in the villages and even created a call-centre helpline for hardware, software, and connectivity issues.

But not only did the computer and internet have no integral transactional role in the agricultural trading system, in most cases, the internet was not even the primary means for obtaining price information from ITC-IBD's warehouse. *Sanchalaks* preferred to use the telephone to enquire about prices and obtain transaction numbers from the warehouse during the course of the day. In fact, ITC-IBD's price soon became a public commodity freely available in the region. Villagers obtained it from farmers returning from town in the evening, or by calling the hub themselves, or even from public loudspeakers and blackboards outside the *sanchalak's* house; some got it from the

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<sup>33</sup> The source of the weather information is the meteorological department of the government. The extent of the weather information is still, unfortunately, only until the district level. Usually the generic forecast obtained on television is enough to generate discussion in the village on when to start planting. Newspapers also give suggested dates from agricultural scientists. However, the actual impact of the weather is extremely local—one part of a village can get rain and the other part may not.



neighbouring village when there was no *eChoupal* in their village or when they were not on good terms with the *sanchalak*. Initial expectations of the company that the computer would generate greater trust in the price information since farmers would be able to see it on the screen, as opposed to the *sanchalak* simply informing them orally after obtaining it over the telephone, did not play out. The telephone, and since 2007 the mobile phone, has remained the medium of choice for obtaining the price.

The *eChoupal* is essentially a set of private marketplaces established in competition with government-owned market yards to enable ITC-IBD to procure larger volumes and better quality of soyabean and other crops. With the establishment of *Choupal Sagars*, ITC-IBD has shifted focus to rural retail by providing a wide array of goods and services to farmers. In fact, the payment for their soyabean is given to farmers inside the *Choupal Sagar* premises, presenting farmers with the opportunity to browse around the rural mall and buy items they may need.

About the computers in the villages, in 2005, *sanchalaks* in Sehore district were using them for email, internet browsing (newspapers and entertainment websites) and playing video CDs and games.<sup>34</sup> A few *sanchalaks* in Dewas district accessed real-time fluctuations on the Chicago Board of Trade and the Indian online commodity futures website NCDEX (National Commodity Exchange) in 2006. Others sometimes checked historical market yard prices on government websites. Some of them had provided free access to academic test results for students in their villages and a few were also sending

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<sup>34</sup> Top websites accessed through the 1100 *eChoupals* in MP in June 2005: [www.soyachoupal.com](http://www.soyachoupal.com) (3.95%), [www.webdunia.com](http://www.webdunia.com) (4.18%), [www.epatra.com](http://www.epatra.com) (1.41%), and [www.mpresults.nic.in](http://www.mpresults.nic.in). Data obtained from Mr. T.K. Radhakrishnan, Manager-IT, ITC-IBD, Bhopal, July 2005.

queries through the *soyachoupal* website (See Appendix 1 for anecdotes on computer usage).<sup>35</sup>

In villages where the *sanchalak* was using the computer, it was only accessible to family members such as young children or elder male relatives of the *sanchalak*. Interviews with *sanchalaks* in Sehore district in 2005 revealed that they were afraid of the computer breaking down if people in the village were allowed to touch it. Also, there seemed to be no push from ITC-IBD's side to encourage more *sanchalaks* to use the computer using systematic training programs and the only way *sanchalaks* obtained training on the machine was when engineers came over for repairs. As of July 2005, there was no program to encourage villagers to access the machine, even for educational purposes (such as computer training for children).

It is ironic then that the concept of the *eChoupal* embodies within it public interaction and involvement. A *choupal* is the public meeting place in a village and the *eChoupal* reflects an attempt to make the internet center an alternative place for sharing information and meeting people using ICTs. ITC-IBD's process of creating an *eChoupal* involves the *sanchalak* taking a public oath that he will keep the *eChoupal* open for everyone in the village; it is explained to the villagers present that the *eChoupal* is a public benefit because it is paid for by ITC-IBD: it is not the personal property of the *sanchalak*. In fact, the very meaning of *sanchalak* is 'information provider' and in local usage, most people drop the 'e' and refer to the kiosk as only the '*choupal*'. The

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<sup>35</sup> ITC-IBD restricted access to almost all internet sites in 2005 due to excessive pornographic usage, and the only information available on these machines was a few news websites, email, and static agricultural information on pests and district level weather.

underlying assumption is that anyone in the village can access the machine, whether on their own or through an intermediary.

However, in the villages I visited in Bhopal and Vidisha districts in 2002-2003, in Sehore district in 2005, and in Dewas, Indore and Dhar districts in 2006, it did not seem that anyone else other than the *sanchalak* shared a sense of ownership or understanding of the computer; the *sanchalak* was called the “*choupal agent*” (a focus reflecting the commissions that he would earn as opposed to the service he would provide as a *sanchalak*); most villagers did not know about the computer, and some villagers who did know, expressed discomfort that no one else was allowed to use the computer.

As a result, ITC-IBD’s investment in computers may be promoting access to information technology for the families of the 6000 *sanchalaks* of ITC-IBD, but it is not clear whether the village in general is benefiting at all. Since the selection criteria for *sanchalaks* is inherently biased towards selecting relatively better off farmers from the dominant caste in most villages, these computers have been installed in the homes of relatively better-off families and have become means of personal entertainment or communication for them.

Thus, it is a misnomer to consider the *eChoupal* as an “ICT for development” intervention bringing about rural development. It is paradoxical that the *eChoupals* received several “IT for rural development” awards from international development agencies such as the Development Gateway of the World Bank. This reflects less the stated intentions of ITC-IBD and more the needs of the development community to find positive stories about the use of ICTs for rural development in an environment where failure has been the norm. Since the *eChoupal* project started at the same time as the hype

about using ICTs overtook development agencies, it was to the benefit of both ITC-IBD and development experts to view the project as a successful example of using ICTs for rural development.

During interviews with me in December 2002-January 2003, and July 2005, company officials were positive and enthusiastic about using the computer infrastructure in innovative ways to bring about rural development for the village in general. However, over time, they too realized that information and computers were one part of a much more complex set of interventions that were needed, both for transforming agrarian markets as well as for initiating larger processes of rural change. Mr. S. Sivakumar, ITC-IBD's CEO, in a speech at the eIndia conference in New Delhi in July 2007, emphasized that "information technology is possibly a necessary but not a sufficient condition" for transforming agricultural markets. "Non-ICT components are equally important. ... Simply broadcasting prices, or making them available online, through SMS, on radio, etc., is not good enough." There is a need to provide "complementary infrastructure such as buying so that transaction is possible. Information alone is not good enough. ... Human infrastructure and physical infrastructure are required" (Sivakumar 2007).

Yet, projects intervening in agrarian markets continue to fetishize technology. As I described in the beginning of this chapter, in June 2008, the New York Times reported about a Reuters-funded project that provides price information to farmers through text-messages on mobile phones in the state of Maharashtra. The article suggests that inefficiencies in agrarian markets arise because farmers are unable to compare market prices in different markets. "The farmer would decide which market to travel to, then would just sell to that market. So there was no competition between markets." It further

goes on to say, “Reuters has collected anecdotal evidence from farmers about how the service has influenced their decisions about crop sales. One farmer, according to Reuters, held back the sale of 30 quintals of soyabeans for 15 days after noticing that prices had been rising for several days. He was able to get 400 extra rupees per quintal” (Arango 2008).

Interventions such as these, while adding one more means for farmers to obtain price information, quickly make the leap from information to monetary benefits for farmers without recognizing the various power relationships and socioeconomic structures that make up and intervene in agrarian markets. Any intervention expecting to transform agrarian markets requires sensitivity to such structures of power starting with understanding the specific manifestations of particular crops in particular geographies. Regarding the specific example of the soyabean farmer, soyabean prices have risen from an average of 1200 rupees per quintal to nearly 1800 rupees per quintal since November 2007 due to the reduction in soyabean acreage in the United States as farmers shifted to more lucrative corn production for biofuels. The last time such a spike took place was in 2004. Almost all farmers in Ranipura, large and small, rich and poor, obtained much higher prices for their soyabean after the 2007 harvest and after the 2008 harvest since the global price of soyabean continued to remain high. Viewing the Reuters’ farmer’s 400 rupee extra income per quintal in this larger context makes it seem less extraordinary and perhaps not necessarily a result of the information obtained through Reuters’ service.

### **Price Maximizing versus Savings Maximization**

The prevailing discourse on the use of price information by farmers, such as that underlying the Reuters’ project, expects farmers to be price maximizers. However, this

research argues that such a rationale makes assumptions about the behaviour of farmers without attempting to understand the environment within which they conduct transactions of their produce. Farmers are expected to behave like rational, utility-maximizing individuals who make informed choices if they are provided with more information. Such behaviour forms the core of self-disciplining citizens under ideas of neoliberal governmentality (Barry et al. 1996) who are expected to empower themselves. They are expected to desire more information and make efforts to obtain information on prices, to calculate their costs of holding on to the crop, and make informed choices about when to sell to ensure as far as possible that they will get a higher price. The utility that is to be maximized is the price. Such behaviour fits very well with the profile of traders in the *mandi* or with companies like ITC-IBD who hold on to stocks of soyabean and sell them when prices are higher.

In contrast, this research suggests that although soyabean farmers make calculations about when to sell their crop—such calculations are not based on extensive analysis of *mandi* prices over the course of the entire season or year, even though, today, *mandi* price information is ubiquitously available to a large majority of soyabean farmers. Rather, farmers sell soyabean when they need cash to conduct transactions. Instead of maximizing price, relatively better-off farmers in Ranipura made efforts to maximize their savings in the form of stored commodities (cf. Ferguson 1994). Such farmers tried their best to ensure they did not have cash in hand or in the bank for an extended period of time. This was because it was easier for family members and relatives to make claims upon cash—claims which the farmer, who was usually male, may not be too keen to

fulfil.<sup>36</sup> Instead, they waited until the need for cash arose and gave themselves a week or 10 days to take their produce to the market or organise for it to be sold by a trader coming to the village. The need for cash could be for illness, marriage or funeral expenses, buying a new tractor or implements, digging a tube well, making a latrine or building parts of the house, settling the payment for a loan, loaning money to someone else, buying new stock of alcohol, paying electricity expenses, buying fertilizer, or any other such requirement that can only be fulfilled through cash. Once others in the village learnt about a cash influx without a corresponding expenditure associated with it, claims were often made on that cash. Hence, relatively better-off farmers preferred to stock their soyabean (and wheat) for as long as possible until it was absolutely necessary to sell it.

Poor farmers sold right at harvest because they had to repay consumption and production loans, a practice known as distress sales. Those who farmed winter wheat also had to buy inputs for the next crop. Prices at harvest are the lowest and preventing distress sales has been an important aim of policymaking for agrarian markets. The Indian government, on the recommendation of the Guru Committee, created a specific intervention known as negotiable warehouse receipts to help such farmers. Farmers could deposit their soyabean in bags at a select warehouse, pay a monthly rent and obtain a warehouse receipt which is similar to a mortgage note. They could take it to a bank or a

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<sup>36</sup> Chapter four traces the implication of the shift to growing a cash crop like soyabean for the relationship between women and men. It discusses the inability of women to make claims upon cash for their personal needs and household requirements, in a patrilineal society like in Malwa.

private financier who would give them a loan for 70-90% of the value of the produce.<sup>37</sup>

They would in effect get money for their produce without having actually sold it.<sup>38</sup>

However, farmers who ended up making distress sales were those who owned less than 2-2.5 hectares of land and their total production was not more than 30-40 quintals of soyabean at the maximum.<sup>39</sup> Warehouses require a minimum deposit of 100 bags (at times relaxing it to 50 bags). So a majority of farmers who are targeted for the scheme don't qualify for obtaining space in a warehouse. Small farmers store their 30-40 bags in and around their own *kaccha* houses. According to Alok Sharma, the manager of a warehouse in Anaradh village, about 10 km from Dhar, a farmer needs to farm at least 6 hectares with a production of 16 quintal per hectare to be able to keep his bags in the warehouse.<sup>40</sup> 76% of farmers in Dhar district own less than 4 hectares of land, putting this scheme beyond their reach.<sup>41</sup> Larger farmers who qualify for warehouse space usually have their own godowns or *pacca* rooms in their house for storage and are not in immediate need of money for planting the next crop. They have the finances to hold onto to their crop for several months to a year until they have to sell.

So whom does this policy benefit? Traders need space for storing the produce they purchase inside and outside the *mandi*. Since most of them live in the crowded

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<sup>37</sup> The interest rate from banks was 0.8% per month (9.6% per annum), much lower than the private moneylending rate of 1-1.2% per month (12-14.4% per annum). The common rate in Ranipura and Dhar was between 2-3% per month (24-36% per annum).

<sup>38</sup> According to Alok Sharma, the manager of a warehouse in Anaradh village, about 10 km from Dhar, a farmer could take a loan from someone else to pay back the warehouse and take the bags to sell in the *mandi* once prices rose. That person could be a trader who would finalise the deal at the warehouse itself and pick up the bags directly, concluding a transaction outside the *mandi* (an illegal transaction). Or it could be a relative or friend whom one can repay after selling the produce in the *mandi*. *Interview*, September 13, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> The most productive farmers obtained 20-24 quintals per hectare in Dhar.

<sup>40</sup> *Interview*, Anaradh warehouse. September 13, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> It was 70% in 1993. All India figure is even lower at 95%. (See *District Statistics Handbook: 2000, 2000* and NSSO 2006.



bazaar areas of the city and space is at a premium in the *mandi*, they need to rent warehouse space. It was suggested many times to me that traders had stored their stocks in warehouses around Dhar under the name of farmers. Through the loans offered under the warehouse scheme in exchange for keeping produce, traders are able to access finances to enhance their monthly turnover—to the extent of enabling them to participate even without using their own money. The scheme also subsidized farmers, cooperatives, individuals, and corporations to establish warehouses of a minimum 100 tons (1000 quintals) to maximum 10,000 tons. Private companies like ITC-IBD have been able to subsidize the construction of their *Choupal Sagars*, the rural malls associated with the *soyachoupal* warehouse. Corporations are given a 15% subsidy on capital cost with a maximum amount of 2.8 million rupees. Thus, government policy inspired by neoliberal models which emphasize the role of credit in supporting farmers in agrarian markets has supported traders and corporations instead.

### **Farmers' Battles in the Marketplace**

As opposed to the ephemeral vision of empowerment through information technology, this research explores alternative ways in which soyabean farmers in Malwa attempt to exercise power in the marketplace. One of the major impacts of ITC-IBD's *eChoupal* was the realization by its competitors such as Ruchi Soya, the oldest and largest soyabean processor in India, and other smaller processing companies that they could also set up private marketplaces in leased warehouses in Madhya Pradesh to attract farmers away from the government-owned *mandi*. Dropping the 'e', the word *choupal* soon become synonymous with a private hub started in competition against the *mandi* and

two companies in the Malwa region, Ruchi Soya and Bajrang Soya, started their own *choupals* in 2004-05.<sup>42</sup>

To build a *choupal*, private companies had to obtain licenses from the government, report their functioning to, and allow themselves to be monitored by officials in the *mandi* nearest to the location of the *choupal*. Every year licenses have to be renewed. The *mandi* office monitors daily transactions of farmers at each *choupal* as well as at the *mandi*. A *mandi* office staff member brings over new receipt books to ITC-IBD's *choupal* in Dhar everyday and takes back copies of completed farmer transaction receipts to be entered into the *mandi*'s information recording system, both manual and electronic. Further, the *mandi* office collects taxes at 2.2% on every transaction whether inside the *mandi* or at a *choupal*. Every 10 days, companies also report how much soyabean they have purchased at their factory, how much has been processed, and how much inventory is left.

From 2004 onwards, the *choupals* catalyzed a change in the marketing of agricultural produce because the increased competition resulting from a parallel buying infrastructure brought uncertainty in the minds of traders and challenged their hegemony in the *mandi*. Because of the competition from the *choupal* "there is more decency,

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<sup>42</sup> In 2003 the ITC-IBD *choupal* was started in a warehouse about 2 km before the Dhar *mandi* when coming to town from Ranipura. The capacity was 100 tons per day. In November 2006 an electronic weighbridge was installed and the capacity doubled. In 2003, the Ruchi *choupal* started in Lebad, situated 20 km from Dhar, in an empty lot inside the premises of another factory of the Ruchi group, the Ruchi Strips and Alloys. Mr. Arvind Gupta of Ruchi Soya was posted here to purchase soyabean. An electronic weighbridge increased their capacity and helped them purchase 100-200 tons per day during the soyabean harvest and in 2005 they had bought 7800 tons in all. They factored in transportation costs to the soyabean processing plant in Manglia in Indore district and labour costs and then decided the farmer's rate. In November 2006 Ruchi started another *choupal* in the town of Dhar itself, right opposite the existing ITC-IBD *choupal*. This one was managed by an ex-Dhar *mandi* trader, Ashish Jain Gangwal. He informed us that they manually weighed individual bags of soyabean and bought between 15-20 tons a day. The storage capacity was 500 tons. The Bajrang *choupal* was situated at the Bajrang processing plant in Lebad. In September 2007, ITC-IBD opened a *Choupal Sagar* (rural mall) in Dhar, about 4 km outside the city towards the town of Lebad.

modesty, and less rudeness [*shaleenta*, *namrata*, and less *rookhapan*],” on the part of traders, according to the *sanchalak* from Bhaunkhedi in Sehore district near Bhopal. He added that the behaviour of traders towards farmers has changed, regardless of the crop that the farmer is selling: “The trader wants farmers to shift to him.”<sup>43</sup> Farmers engaged with intermediaries at the market yard in battles over the weight of their soyabean, with the rate-setter at the *choupals* in negotiations over deciding the quality of their produce, and in playing off one marketplace against another to get the highest price for their particular transaction. The misguided focus exclusively on technology detracts from understanding these alternative arenas of power struggles and prevents moving of resources to genuinely support farmers in these contestations over power in the marketplace.



“Choupal” Board (on the left in Hindi) outside Bajrang Extraction Pvt. Ltd., a small soyabean processing plant in Dhar district. October 2006. Photo by Richa Kumar.

<sup>43</sup> ITC-IBD only buys soyabean and wheat. Traders buy all crops grown in the region.

### **Accurate Weight at the *Mandi***

The first important struggle waged by farmers in Malwa was against inaccurate weighing by traders at the *mandi*. At both the *mandi* and the *choupals* government-licensed weighers (*tulaavatis*) were supposed to weigh the farmers' produce in a transparent and accountable manner, regardless of which trader or firm had bought it. Weighers were paid a fixed amount per quintal for the total bags they weighed each day. This charge was recovered from farmers as weigher's fees. Farmers also paid for labourers to bag their produce at the traders' shops in the *mandi*. A licensed weigher was stationed at every trader's shop inside the *mandi* as well as at ITC-IBD's weigh-bridge and Ruchi Soya's manual weighing scale in Dhar.<sup>44</sup> At the *choupals*, farmers did not have to pay the weigher's fees or the bagging labour costs. Instead, ITC-IBD and Ruchi Soya paid these costs to the *mandi*. The weigher gave daily reports to the *mandi* on how much soyabean had been bought by the trader or the firm. The weighers rotated on a daily basis from one trader to the next. According to a weigher [*tulaavati*] union post holder, Mangilal Shiromani, they were supposed to authenticate [*satyapan*] the exact weight. "The entire responsibility is ours," said Tarachand, another weigher. "*Mandi* tax is calculated based on the data we give. ...If there is a dispute, then the *tulaavati* is responsible."<sup>45</sup>

At the *mandi*, most traders weighed using manual weighing scales capable of holding one bag (one quintal). Weigher Govardhan Sharma, also a post holder in the union, explained that at least 400 grams per quintal is automatically reduced in the total

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<sup>44</sup> There is no government licensed weigher at Ruchi's *choupal* in Lebad and at the Bajrang *choupal*, also in Lebad.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, November 28, 2006.

weight when weighing using the manual scales. Soyabean falls to the ground while bagging it and putting the bag onto the scales, and the straight arrow which should be vertical when the scale is balanced, is normally always tilted to one side. So one cannot make out whether the weighing is accurate or not.<sup>46</sup> Farmers often complained of inaccurate weighing by the government-licensed weighers on these single-bag weighing scales.

I went with six villagers from Ranipura to the Dhar *mandi* in July 2006—all of them had piled soyabean that was leftover after the sowing on Ajit Singh's tractor. After the auction, we went to the shop of Puja traders in the *mandi*, where Ajit Singh's soyabean was being weighed on old style one-quintal scales. The weigher was making the side with the soyabean bag heavier (lower) than the side with the weight [*baat*]. I commented about it to another farmer from Ranipura, Gautam Singh Rathod (who was Ajit's first cousin) and took a couple of photos. The weigher became perturbed and then tried to balance the sides a bit more. Two or three kilograms of soyabean fell to the ground when it was being emptied from the tractor into bags. The plastic sheet on the bottom [*paal*] was too small to cover the entire breadth of the tractor's backside from where soyabean was falling onto the cement floor. Gautam said that the trader [purposely] won't keep a bigger *paal*. Ajit Singh seemed completely lost, unlike the farmer before him who was anxiously picking up the scattered soyabean and observing what the weigher was doing. A group of farmers in Janpur Bavadiya village in Sehore district in July 2005 expressed to me the desperation on the part of many farmers to gather the scattered grain, so that they are not penalized in the total weight. "We cannot

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<sup>46</sup> Interview, February 27, 2007.

remove the grain from the cracks in the floor,” they said. “And as a farmer is trying to gather the scattered grain the trader yells at him to rush out because there are so many farmers waiting in line.”

Although initially at many *choupals* in Madhya Pradesh these single-bag weighing scales were being used, by 2005-2006, electronic weighbridges became more common. Here, the entire tractor-trolley filled with soyabean is weighed, then the soyabean is emptied into bags or in a heap on the ground using the hydraulic mechanism of the tractor, and finally the empty trolley is weighed again to determine the weight of the soyabean. In ITC-IBD’s *choupal* in Dhar, the electronic weighbridge was installed in November 2006, doubling the daily purchase capacity to 200 tons (2000 quintals). At the Ruchi *choupal* in Dhar, the manual weighing scale was still in use in 2007. In response to the use of large electronic weighbridges at some of the *choupals*, many A-class *mandis* in Madhya Pradesh installed these weighbridges, too.

However, it became a common practice for traders to reduce the weight of the total produce by 300 grams per quintal if it had been weighed on the electronic weighbridge. According to the *mandi* office, the electronic weighbridge has a margin of error of 5 kilograms on 300 quintals or approximately one large truck. Traders use this to cut 300 grams. Mr. Mittal, a *mandi* official, suggested that some farmers who are in a hurry ask traders to use the weighbridge and agree to the cut in return. They don’t complain so the system [*pratha*] continues although it is not sanctioned. But at the margin of error suggested, the cut per quintal should not be more than 17 grams! Ramesh Lal Jain, an old trader in the *mandi* explained this informal rule to Suraj Jat from Ranipura and to me. “Traders send produce to buyers outside by packing it in individual bags of

100 kg each. We cannot store it without stacking it in bags. Loose grain takes up a lot of space.” Thus, even if farmers weigh it on the weighbridge and dump it in front of the traders’ godown, traders have to fill it in bags. “In filling bags the quantity becomes less. ...At the factory when they weigh it the weight is always less. We cut 300 grams because we need to ensure the full weight,” he concluded.<sup>47</sup>

But, farmers did not accept this practice without opposition. Ajit Singh of Ranipura got another tractor of soyabean four months later—this time the harvested crop in early November 2006. After the auction, Kriti traders agreed to let his tractor be weighed on the electronic weighbridge. That morning, Ajit Singh and his son chanced to meet the President of the *mandi* committee, Jam Singh Davar, a tribal farmer, who was a friend of Ajit’s eldest brother in Ranipura. My research assistant was with them. Ajit Singh asked the President if there was a rule to reduce 300 grams per quintal from the total weight. The President replied that there was no such rule and nothing of this sort had been discussed by the committee. “If you want to get it reduced of your own free will [*swechha se*] then you can. Otherwise you bring it in writing from a trader or weigher that they will deduct 300 grams and we will initiate proceedings [*karyavahi*] against them.” Ajit Singh turned to my assistant and said we will tell Davar if the trader deducts anything, we won’t be afraid.

At Kriti traders’ shop in the afternoon, the weigher made a slip with 7 kg less than the amount written on the electronic slip received at the electronic weighbridge.<sup>48</sup> Ajit

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<sup>47</sup> Interview, February 24, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Farmers ended up having to pay twice for weighing if they used the weighbridge. Not only did they 10 rupees for the electronic receipt at the weighbridge, they also had to pay 1-2 rupees per quintal for weighing and bagging at the traders’ shop. These charges were waived off at the *choupals* with ITC-IBD and Ruchi paying the weigher’s fees to the *mandi*.

Singh went to the accountant of Kriti traders and started fighting—I will not accept the deduction. How can your weigher do this? The accountant replied, “I cannot do anything about it. You get it in writing from the trader [*seth*] or the weigher [that the deduction is invalid. Only then I will give you the extra money].” The group with Ajit Singh trooped back to the weigher and challenged him to write on a piece of paper that he will deduct 300 grams, which they planned to give to the *mandi* President. The labourers stopped the work and asked the weigher to sort out the matter before they would continue. The weigher was an old man and his hands trembled as he finally asked Ajit Singh for his slip, changed the weight from 2463 kg to 2470 kg (24.7 quintals) and gave it back—best to avoid hassle [*kaun jhanjhat mein pade*], he must have thought.

My assistant had informally met another trader, a friend of his, to ask for his opinion on the issue. The trader replied, “...The weighing scales have differences [*kaante mein phark rehata hai*]. ...This margin has to be given to us. We send grain all over the place. Economic arrangements [*vyavastha*] are in our hands. ... The government is functioning because of traders [*baniye logon se chal rahi hai*]. If we do not buy produce then what will the farmer do?” My assistant then responded saying that the *mandi* President has asked farmers to bring such cases to his attention. The trader dismissed this by saying,

“The President is illiterate. He doesn’t know anything. We can deal with him. The President before him, Parvat Singh Chauhan, was educated. He also couldn’t change things. In his time we reduced the cut from 500 grams to 300 grams. He had requested us, please take heed of my position [*meri position ka dhyan rakhte hue*] and make it 300 g. We will not agree below 300 grams,” he stated emphatically.

Although Ajit Singh was able to obtain payment for the full weight of his soyabean, most farmers in the Dhar *mandi* were forced to accept deductions in weight. Traders held



strong positions on this issue and usually prevailed over farmers, most of whom visited the *mandi* just twice a year to sell their crop. Traders came to the *mandi* everyday and were able to exert much greater influence on the government officials who are supposed to be monitoring their practices and protecting farmers. The last few years have seen several conflicts erupt in the *mandi* premises resulting from disputes not only over weighing but also over the auction, labourers, traffic jams, and timings of the *mandi*. In November-December 2007, the *mandi* was closed for five days because of the inaccurate weighing and 300 gram deduction issue. The Bharatiya Kisan Union (Indian Farmers' Association) was on one side while the Traders' Association was on the other. Some farmers went to jail, several traders were fined, and the District Collector had to intervene after local officials in the *mandi* were unable to handle the situation.<sup>49</sup> Even though farmers express strong sentiments about the accurate weight of their crop and farmers' associations have taken it up seriously, development organisations intervening in agrarian markets have failed to pay heed to this issue. Similarly, although reports on the *eChoupals* have lauded their accurate weighing practices (Annamalai and Rao 2003), they have failed to engage closely with the main issue faced by farmers when they go to sell at the *choupals*—that of judgements over quality. It is to this we now turn.

### **Questions over Quality at the *Choupals***

The decision of the final rate to be given to a farmer for the soyabean depends on the assessment of its quality. Whereas accurate weighing has been a focal point of conflict at the *mandi*, farmers have been negotiating at the *choupals* for lesser penalties for poorer quality produce. At the *choupal* in Dhar, Nitin Rai, a young man in his

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<sup>49</sup> See *Nai Dunia*, 21 November 2007 and 6-12 December 2007.

twenties, was the rate-setter who made the final decision regarding the quality of soyabean of each trolley. He would climb up and take a look at the soyabean just like traders did at the *mandi*, dunking his hand into the loose grain or pulling out a handful from several bags stacked up on the trolley. Based on his estimation of foreign matter, spoilt or green seed, and moisture, he would give the farmer the FAQ price advertised the night before or would reduce it accordingly. In the processing plant of ITC-IBD in Dakachiya in Indore district, contentious samples could be tested in a laboratory which used a grading machine for removing foreign matter and broken seeds from a sample, but this device was not available in all the warehouses of the company. The worst level of quality that ITC-IBD's *choupal* accepted was 13% moisture, 7% foreign matter [*mitti*], 5% discoloured seed [*daagi*], and 10% green seed.<sup>50</sup> Below that, all soyabean was rejected and farmers would have to find another buyer, mostly another trader at the *mandi*. Dr. Jaya Mehta, an independent academic researcher and writer for the magazine, *Sandarbh*, in Indore, felt this practice made things difficult for farmers. "Farmers face uncertainty. ITC-IBD can reject their grain and they have to take it back [and pay extra costs for transportation to the *mandi*]. In the *mandi* such rejected grain can be bought by another buyer [without the farmer incurring extra expense]."<sup>51</sup>

According to a *sanchalak* in Sehore district, "Sometimes they [ITC-IBD] are very strict. Their behaviour is argumentative [*naram garam vyavahaar*] with farmers. They should produce a grading of the material [through a lab test] but the official gives a rate based on sight only, not a test. The same thing sometimes sells 50 rupees higher in the *mandi*." At the *mandi*, traders checked the level of moisture by touch and by biting the

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<sup>50</sup> Mr. Deepak Pathak, Manager of the ITC-IBD *choupal* in Dhar, October 28, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, March 28, 2006.

soyabean.<sup>52</sup> At some of the *choupals* moisture meters were available and they were very accurate. Nandlal Singh, the *sanchalak* from Punjapura in Dewas district said that 1% extra moisture or foreign matter would reduce the rate by the price of 1 kg of soyabean i.e. 13 Rs less on a rate of 1200 Rs. per quintal (90 kg). The moisture meter at the *choupals* gave more accuracy, and hence, penalized farmers in a manner that they were not used to earlier. In fact, at the Ruchi *choupal* in Lebad, the moisture meter was so accurate that farmers complained and asked Guptaji, who been setting rates for 10 years, to do it instead. He complied. About the ITC *choupal* in Dakachiya, Bhavani Singhji of Arjun Baroda village in Indore district complained, “They only want good material from farmers. From their commission agents in the *mandi*, they will take poor quality also.” But then he said, “They pay farmers in cash immediately. With traders, they have to pay only after 10-15 days [and can afford to be more lenient].”<sup>53</sup>

Surprisingly, however, the distinctiveness of soyabean is that farmers in Malwa did not view it from a perspective of quality. Unlike a food crop such as wheat, where farmers took pride in “making quality” [quality *banaate hain*], soyabean was simply to be processed into cattle feed. This was highlighted by Bharat Jat of Ranipura when he said, at the *mandi*, “even rotten [*sadee hui*] soyabean will sell. No one will buy rotten [*sadee hui*] wheat.”<sup>54</sup>

In my interviews with different farmers, the unanimous viewpoint was that quality was not very important in soyabean. In fact, when I mentioned quality, farmers would

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<sup>52</sup> According to Dr. Vyas, at the Sehore Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Agricultural College, “If you bite the soyabean and it gives a sharp sound [*kat ki aawaaz*] and it breaks, then it is optimal in terms of moisture. If it gets crushed [*pichak jaati hai*] then there is moisture in it.” *Interview*, Sehore, February 8, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> *Interview*, March 23, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> *Interview*, September 11, 2006

invariably talk about the seed, and different varieties such as NRC-7, JS-335, Samrat, JS-71-05, etc. According to Dr. O.P. Joshi at the National Research Centre for Soyabean in Indore, “By looks there is marginal difference [between different soyabean varieties]. NRC 7 gives 22% oil and JS 335 gives 18% oil but their price is the same. ... The industry demands it and crushes it. ...Quality—protein level, oil content, fatty acid spectrum—all this is not very important.”<sup>55</sup>

What made soyabean most different from many other crops was that poor farmers had as much a chance of producing good quality soyabean as did rich farmers—the only difference would be in the yield (quantity produced).<sup>56</sup> This was because poor quality as adjudged in the market yard was a result of external additions to the grain and not due to intrinsic qualities of the bean stemming from poor use of inputs or low soil fertility. One of the primary reasons for poor quality was *daagi*, which was a discolouration of soyabean where the skin turns bluish/black from its natural yellow. This occurred when the soyabean had been cut and the plants left on the field in heaps to dry in the sun—and it rained. Farmers would try to protect the soyabean by covering it with plastic sheets but any pods with excessive surface contact with water would be affected. It could also result when a tall plant variety bent down with the weight of its mature pods or due to heavy rain (known as lodging) and the pods remained in contact with the wet mud for a long time. This usually happened to the crop of an entire area when untimely rains fell during and after the harvest, affecting rich and poor, large and small farmers alike. However, small farmers would be able to save more of their soyabean from *daagi* because they would be dealing with a smaller cropping area.

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<sup>55</sup> Interview, March 29, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Poor farmers would also have smaller sized seeds in the pods but this would only affect the overall weight of the crop, not the estimation of its quality.

Another reason for poor quality soyabean was a large quantity of mud and foreign matter mixed with the seed caused by threshing the crop when it was not completely dry. Usually the crop was cut and left to dry outside in the fields for two to three days or more before being threshed. If it was even slightly damp or moist at the time of threshing, the stem would not get cut properly and would come out with the seeds as small, one inch sticks [*danthal*]. The roots may also have moist mud particles stuck to them and this mud would turn into pellets the size of the soyabean and come out with the seed. This can happen to any farmer, and possibly more to larger farmers because they have a huge crop to cut and thresh before the soyabean shatters (see chapter three). This gives them a very small window to cut the crop using available labour resources. But large farmers also have the time and resources to clean the mud and *danthal* from the soyabean—mostly using labour of the women in the house or employed servants. This could take a few days to a week and they have the ability to withhold the marketing of their produce for that time. Without this cleaning the crop will not qualify for purchase at the *choupals*. Small farmers usually do not have the financial capability to wait for a few days before selling. They need to pay back crop loans, consumption loans, and take out new loans for the next crop, if they are planning to plant wheat. Hence, they would not be able to qualify for selling their soyabean at the *choupals*. Dr. Jaya Mehta argued that the representativeness of the “*choupal*” as catering to everyone in the village ought to be seriously questioned if the policy of the *choupal* continued to exclude farmers due to their small lot size and poorer quality. Soyabean was the only main crop for many small farmers as most of them were poor and did not have tubewells and could not grow irrigated wheat or gram in winter.

Nevertheless, farmers tried to negotiate the assessment of quality of their soyabean at all the *choupals*. At ITC-IBD's *choupal*, *sanchalaks* sometimes negotiated a higher rate for farmers from their own village with the rate-setter by suggesting that the quality of the farmer's soyabean was not as bad as it had been estimated. The Panditji of Ranipura presented an interesting case in this regard. We were talking at the Ruchi *choupal* in Dhar, where for the first time Panditji had cleaned his soyabean and brought it on Sameer Singh Rathod's tractor to sell at the *choupal* in November 2006. At the urging of Sameer Singh and his brother Vigneshji, Panditji had tried to improve the quality of his soyabean so that it would be accepted at the *choupal*. "I would have got only 1100 rupees for it. Sameer and his brothers advised me to clean it. Vigneshji came to check twice. So I am getting 1380 rupees now. ...First they [rate setter] said 1375. I put 'force', saying it is good *maal* [produce]. Then they increased to 80. ...First time I cleaned the soyabean. And first time I am getting a good rate." The board outside the Ruchi *choupal* read 1370 and the highest *mandi* rate that day was 1400 rupees. The modal rate was Rs. 1350. As one can see, at the *choupals* farmers [and *sanchalaks*] can, in effect, 'nudge' the rate-setter to give 5 or 10 rupees more. The Punjapura *sanchalak* in Dewas district, too, had mentioned that at the Ruchi *choupal*, "They can give a higher rate [than the published rate] also." Since the *mandi* price depended upon an auction with several traders in the fray and poor quality soyabean was not rejected, such negotiations did not take place in the *mandi*.<sup>57</sup>

Most discussions of the *eChoupals* focus on ITC-IBD's need for obtaining good quality soyabean. But there is no discussion on the process of judgement of quality at the

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<sup>57</sup> Such negotiations did, however, take place between *mandi* traders and farmers when the transaction was concluded outside the *mandi* premises, illegally.

*choupals*, which ironically, can penalise poor quality as well as best quality soyabean (see the next section). Judgements over quality at the *choupals* are always a negotiated compromise between farmers and the *choupal* rate-setters—but usually farmers have little power to influence the outcome in their favour. Surprisingly, there does not seem to be a uniform standard of judging quality across various buying sites. According to Ruchi's procurement manager in Indore, if their company employee buys soyabean *dal* [cracked seed], he is not penalised because ultimately all seed is crushed to get oil and DOC. But if a trader buys and sends it to the factory, it will be removed in grading and the trader will lose weight and money.<sup>58</sup> How have the measures of quality historically come into being in a crop like soyabean, which ultimately is all meant to be crushed into cattle feed? How are different standards enforced for different buyers in the marketplace? Who are the actors and which are the forces that determine parameters of quality in the marketplace and that enforce them on farmers in Malwa? These are questions that must be engaged with in greater depth to understand and support the struggles that farmers engage in over determining of the quality of their soyabean in the marketplace.

### **Playing off the Two Marketplaces**

Although farmers decided to sell their soyabean when they required cash, once they made up their mind that they wanted to sell, they tried to ensure they obtained as high a price as possible within the timeline they had to obtain cash. If they hit a stretch when prices were rising, they would get more money, if they didn't, they would settle for what they got. Many of them who were aware of the *choupals* would check prices in the *choupals* and in the *mandi* with the help of *sanchalaks* who would switch between the

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Yogesh Shah, Procurement Manager in Indore *mandi*, Ruchi Soya, April 15, 2006.

two places all day long, especially when tractors from their own village had come. Farmers would line up for the auction in the *mandi* to get a quote for their quality of soyabean and then make an assessment regarding the amount of reduction in the *choupal's* rate they could expect at the *choupal* to decide which place was better. At the *mandi* farmers were free to pay a five rupee penalty and cancel the transaction once the auction was over if the price did not suit them. Many times, farmers would take only a small sample of their produce to get an actual quote for it from both places and then take their trolley to the best place. The *sanchalak* from Bhaunkhedi (Sehore district) said that even among farmers who had already taken a transaction number for ITC-IBD's warehouse, "two out of ten go to the *mandi* first and if they see the rate is less than the *choupal* then they will go to the *choupal*." In Dhar, the Ruchi *choupal's* rate was same as the ITC *choupal*—both were situated right opposite each other. Both rates were hand written in chalk on black colour boards hung outside the gate on two trees along the main road—farmers could see them from the tractor itself.

Mohan Jat was the first farmer from Ranipura who tried out the newly opened Ruchi *choupal* in November 2006. He had enquired about the rate from them for two days over the telephone and on November 6<sup>th</sup> his trolley reached the *choupal* at 3 pm in the afternoon. He asked the rate-setter about the actual price he would get. The rate on the board said Rs. 1240. The rate setter was willing to give only Rs. 1225, maximum Rs. 1230 because the soyabean was not of the best quality. So Mohan decided to try at the *mandi*. By 5 pm the *mandi* rate reduced to 1200-1210 rupees only. So Mohan contemplated going back to the *choupal*. If Modiji [the largest buyer in Dhar *mandi*] bought his soyabean, it would take 4 more hours to weigh and get the payment. It took 10



minutes to go back the two kilometers to the *choupal*. There was only one tractor there. The Ruchi rate setter asked why have you come back? Mohan told him that he went to the *mandi* to buy fertiliser but it was not available so he came back. He made up the story otherwise Ruchi might also reduce the price Mohan thought. He finally sold his 38 quintal 8 kg at Rs. 1230 per quintal. He was not charged for weighing and bagging the soyabean. Mohan left for the village at 6:30 pm. The *mandi* rate ranged from 1000 to 1261 that day.

During this time, the rush in the Dhar *mandi* was a sight to see. It was right after the soyabean harvest and all the roads leading to the *mandi* were clogged with tractors lined up for two-three days at a time. Farmers from Ranipura would be sleeping on their trolleys filled with soyabean all night, at times covering themselves and the soyabean with plastic sheets to take protection from the untimely rain. Once the auction was over, empty trolleys would be waiting in an hour long line to be weighed on the lone electronic weighbridge.

After this experience, Mohan sold two more of his own soyabean trolleys at Ruchi as well as brought the soyabean of three other tribal farmers from Ranipura to the *choupal* on his tractor. It could be that he wanted his tractor back in the village to complete the sowing of wheat and gram and thus preferred that the transaction get over soon. In the *mandi* he would have to waste the whole day in waiting. Mohan's own brother, Bharat Jat, however, refused to go to the *choupal*. He preferred to sell in the *mandi* a few days later once he got the news that prices were hitting Rs. 1300. On November 11, 2006 when the highest rate was 1312, he received Rs. 1299 for his tractor. He reached the *mandi* at 12:45 pm and his tractor was auctioned at 5:15 pm. He returned

back to Ranipura only late at night. Whereas Mohan preferred to save time, his brother preferred the competitive auction in the *mandi*. He said he did not want only one person setting the price for his good quality soyabean. The auction provided a greater opportunity for the price to go higher, he felt. This turned out to be the case with Shiv bhai's tractor from Ranipura, who also stopped at the Ruchi *choupal* during this time. He was given a quote of Rs. 1275 when the board outside read Rs. 1290. So he came to the *mandi* and the trolley was auctioned at Rs. 1285 to Modiji, the commission agent (CAG) of Gujarat Ambuja, the largest processing plant in Dhar district. The auction was completed at 4 pm but the weighing took several hours since Modiji only uses single-bag electronic machines. Shiv bhai received the payment at 9:30 pm. But even with the weighing and bagging charges of Rs. 2.70 per quintal, he benefited by 7 rupees per quintal.

Gajanandji Maru, an old farmer from Ranipura sold his soyabean on one occasion to the *mandi* and on another occasion to the *choupal*. On October 19, 2006, he brought one trolley of soyabean in the morning and parked his tractor in the main auction shed. Before the auction reached his trolley, Prakash Modi, the largest trader in Dhar *mandi* came by and saw the grain. He knew Gajanandji from before and said, "You could have gone directly to the godown. Don't you know we have a shop [*Godown pe direct le jate. Aapko maloom nahi hai humari dukan hai*]." Modi was referring to his warehouse about 2 km away from the *mandi* where he bought from farmers directly, avoiding the *mandi* and its regulations. At the warehouse Gajanandji would not have to wait in a long line for his tractor to be weighed and Modi would have saved on paying the *mandi* weigher and most importantly, the *mandi* tax. Gajanandji replied, "We had to buy things for the house

so we came here.” So Modi responded, “we have four weighing scales being used at the same time in the *mandi* too.” Gajanandji told my assistant that Modiji really liked the soyabean.

Some time later the auction reached Gajanandji. 10-12 traders along with two *mandi* employees were walking from one tractor to the next. One *mandi* employee would take out a sample of soyabean in a steel bowl and pass it around to the traders. The second person would ask the farmer for his name and the village he was from and note it on a pink slip. The first one would then start the auction based on his own estimation of the base price. During the auction several traders also pushed their hands deep into farmers’ trolleys and scooped out a handful of grain to check its quality. They rolled it in their hands, threw it in the air to release light mud particles and sticks, and caught it again. Traders would jump in shouting bids, starting with 5 rupee increments and ending with one or two rupee increments. In Gajanandji’s case the auction started at 1100 rupees. Modi bid 1110 and then 1125. The rate was jumping fast. 1145. Modi was not letting anyone bid less. Finally Modi said 1193. No one said anything. Then he said 1195, just in case. But no one responded. So the first employee shouted “1193 one-two-three Modiji”. The second employee scribbled “1193 Modiji” on the pink slip and handed it to Gajanandji. He got the highest rate of the day. The modal rate for 19<sup>th</sup> October 2006 was Rs. 1150.

Gajanandji’s nephew was driving the tractor and he asked Modiji where to go. Modiji said “Take it wherever you like. There are four weighing scales [*Jahan iccha ho vahan chale jao*].” My assistant asked the nephew if he would take it to the electronic weighbridge. He replied, “No, we will take it directly to Modiji’s weighing scale. We

have long standing [*purane*] relations with Modiji.” My assistant asked, “Is there any difference in the weight?” The nephew replied, “No there is no difference.” My assistant pursued, “You will save time.” But the nephew said, “We have trust.” There were 4-5 tractors at Modiji’s godown in the *mandi* already. It took 1½ hours for their turn to come. The soyabean was bagged and weighed on the single-bag electronic weighing scale at 2 pm. 62 rupees was deducted as weighing and bagging fees. Gajanandji got Rs. 27,520 at 2:15 pm. He took the tractor to the government fertilizer shop outside the *mandi* and purchased fertilizer to sow wheat and gram. He also purchased household items like edible oil, soap, sugar, tea, spices, etc., for about 1000 rupees and then they left back to Ranipura.

A few weeks later, on November 28, 2006, Gajanandji Maru again brought his soyabean. The same day, Mahesh Jat of Ranipura also got soyabean in two tractors. He had called the *sanchalak* of Chikliya village and learnt the price of Rs. 1370 at the ITC-IBD *choupal*. A few hours later, the ITC-IBD rate had increased to Rs. 1380. Tractors at the *mandi* were also being auctioned in the 1390s range. The highest priced soyabean sold at Rs. 1413 in the *mandi*. Gajanandji’s auction started at 1350 rupees and ended at 1365. He was expecting the bidding to go up till Rs. 1400 or so and was very disappointed. In spite of his good relations with Modiji and the trust he held in the process of the *mandi*, he cancelled his auction in the *mandi*, paying a penalty of Rs. 5 and took his trolley to ITC’s *choupal*. He got Rs. 1370, which was same as the modal *mandi* rate for that day. He did not have to pay for weighing and bagging and neither was 300 grams reduced from the total quantity despite weighing the trolley on the electronic weighbridge. So he got an effective rate of Rs. 1375. Farmers often behaved in this

manner—finding out the price in both the *mandi* and the *choupals* and then taking their tractor laden with soyabean to both places before making a final decision. This was feasible in Dhar because the *choupals* were located within 2 kilometres of the *mandi* premises and the cost of going back and forth was minimal. However, in October 2007, when the ITC-IBD *choupal* shifted to a location 5 kilometres outside the perimeter of the town and nearly 8 kilometres away from the *mandi* (to comply with regulations), it reduced the ability farmers like Gajanandji to play off the two marketplaces against each other.

Back to November 2006: The same day Gajanandji sold in the *choupal*, we interviewed Mahendraji of Mahendra brothers, the commission agent for Divya Jyoti, another soyabean processing plant in Dhar. He expressed one problem with the *choupal's* rate. The farmer who received Rs. 1413 at the *mandi* would only have got 1380 rupees per quintal at the *choupal* that day (the rate advertised for FAQ). “Farmer is not benefiting so he should not go. The rate increases because of the auction, the competition. ...Traders get better quality, we improve the quality, and farmer gets more money.” He also added that the government has a loss because the *mandi* tax is a percentage of the price. If the price is higher, the government gets more tax. I interjected asking how many trolleys actually sold above the modal rate. He replied that 25 trolleys out of 240 sold above 1400 rupees. 75 trolleys were chosen to provide the modal rate of 1370. So in effect, this refers to about 10% of farmers who come to the *mandi*.

ITC-IBD's manager in Sehore had explained the same phenomenon to me in 2005. Those with extremely high quality would not benefit immediately at the *choupal*. For instance, he explained, that if ITC-IBD's quoted rate for soyabean was 1200 rupees,

it would be for 2-2-10 (F.A.Q.) level of quality. “If a farmer comes with 0-0-10 quality then in the *mandi* he will get 50 rupees more. But ITC will still give him 1200 Rs.” However, added the manager, “ITC will do insurance for the farmer for free next year.”<sup>59</sup> It is not an immediate gain for the farmer, it is long term. But farmers do not really believe premium in the future – they want cash now. So top premium quality farmers will go to the *mandi* or a trader will stop them on the way.”<sup>60</sup> I have argued earlier that since farmers sell their soyabean only when they require cash for a transaction, it explains why they would prefer to get a higher price at the *mandi* rather than get free insurance or some other benefit in the future from ITC-IBD. At that level, said the manager, ITC-IBD cannot change the price and it can’t change the price upward for one person only. The company cannot give a rate for 0-0-0 or 0-0-10 (i.e. 1260) because then the majority of lower quality farmers will feel that ITC-IBD is reducing the rate too much for him i.e. if a farmer is given 1100 Rs. According to him, it is only those who trust ITC-IBD (for a future premium) who do this, or otherwise those who do not understand market dynamics i.e. those who would like benefit in the present and are not able to figure out that they can make a better gamble at the market yard.<sup>61</sup>

But what about the opposite? What if prices fell in the *mandi* during the course of the day? This is precisely what happened the very next day, November 29, 2006. The price of soyabean opened at Rs. 1360 in Dhar *mandi* at the tractor auction but by afternoon, it fell down to Rs. 1325. Four farmers from Ranipura had brought soyabean to sell in expectation of the high prices of the last few weeks and we all were waiting in the

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<sup>59</sup> ITC-IBD was providing insurance to farmers through its rural distribution system and would pay this farmer’s premium for the extra 50 Rs. that the farmer would have obtained for good quality.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, July 2005.

<sup>61</sup> In fact, when ITC obtains premium quality it is kept separately – 500 tons of such soyabean of #1 quality was kept at this time in July 2005.

auction queue since 10 am. With the terrible rush in the *mandi* their turn came only around 4 pm and they couldn't believe that the price had gone down. All four cancelled their *mandi* receipts and took the tractors to ITC-IBD's *choupal*. The *choupal* rate had to be kept constant and remained at Rs. 1360 all day. Between 3 pm and 4 pm there was a flight of trolleys from the *mandi* to the *choupal*. The next day I found out from the *mandi* records that 59 transactions out of 536 in total (including transactions of bullock carts and small size transactions of less than 10 quintals—a tractor holds between 25-35 quintals) had been cancelled and presumably, the farmers had headed over to the *choupal*. The *choupal* manager informed us that more than 90 trolleys had come that day, compared to an average of 50 to 60 because the market had crashed. The modal rate in the *mandi* was 1320 that day and the highest rate was Rs. 1376.<sup>62</sup> Not only did these farmers get a higher price, they also did not have to pay for bagging and were saved from the 300 gram per quintal deduction in weight despite using the weighbridge. ITC-IBD paid for the weighbridge, the *mandi* weigher's fees, bagging, the revenue stamp on the transaction slip, salaries of its own staff and rent of the warehouse.

The establishment of the *choupals* brought about further competition within the soyabean marketplace where farmers brought their soyabean to sell. However, the main elements of the competition focused primarily on non-price elements such as accurate weighing, courteousness of the buyers, and judgements over quality rather than on the price itself. Since the price of soyabean both in the *mandi* and the *choupals* was dictated by global trends in soyabean meal and palm oil prices, the price in both places usually converged around the *mandi* modal price. But the non-price competition prompted several *mandis* in Madhya Pradesh to install (or repair and restart the use of) electronic

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<sup>62</sup> All four farmers received a rate between 1355 and 1360 rupees per quintal.

weighbridges and helped farmers in their struggles against inaccurate weighing in the marketplace.

## **Conclusion**

This research argues that the discourse of empowering farmers through disintermediation via information technology relies upon a de-contextualised explanation of farmers' marketing practices and constructs "empowerment" narrowly as a transactional benefit to farmers. Projects such as the *eChoupals* have been projected to the international development community as "empowering" in the name of this discourse. In contrast, this research argues that farmers marketing practices in soyabean are shaped by various power relationships in the global and local marketplace starting with assessments that are made on the quality of their produce, their (in)ability to transport their produce to the marketplace, the importance of intermediaries in enabling transactions in a cash crop like soyabean which is not consumed by farmers in India, and the structure of the global commodity chain in soyabean. The proponents of the *eChoupal* project have taken into account some of these concerns and have also acknowledged that information alone is insufficient to bring about changes in agrarian markets. This research points to arenas other than information where farmers attempt to exercise power in various marketplaces where they sell their soyabean. Negotiations over weightment with traders and over quality at the *eChoupal* are some alternative sites of struggles for power. Rather than narrowly focusing on information and prices, supporting farmers in these struggles over the design of the marketplace will be critical in providing avenues for "empowerment."



**Appendix 1: Select examples of computer usage in *eChoupal* villages in Sehore district in June 2005 and Dhar district in October 2006 (Based on interviews with *sanchalaks*)**

**Khandwa, Sehore**

The first year this village did not have a VSAT and the telephone that was connected to the modem was not working. Company officials told him to learn about computers even if it was not related to the business right then. So he got some DTP (Desktop Publishing) course books and MS Excel books from Bhopal and self-taught himself. In one year the internet started working well (once he got a satellite dish) and he became proficient. The most important benefit, he says, is that once can information on all MP *mandis* through a separate website of the MP government known as “Special Crop Information.” Here one can also get an estimate of the next day’s *mandi* price (how much above or below today’s price it could be). He gives information to villagers on all kinds of things; for instance, one person wanted information on the agricultural university in Chandigarh. The CD drive of his computer was broken once and since then he has not allowed others to use the computer much. There is a computer education *Headstart Kendra* (government computer education centre) in the village. But it is closed because no one knows how to run the computer and there are no computer classes. He says that if ITC-IBD tells them to teach children, then he might start classes. But he did not seem optimistic about their ability to learn: “for village kids it is very hard for them to learn because their base is not strong. Fifth standard kids don’t know the alphabet in Hindi,” he lamented.

**Divadiya, Sehore**

The *sanchalak* used the computer only a little bit. He did not get a lot of training. He was told how to access the ITC website and he checked it out. He obtains *sauda* numbers through the phone and checks the *choupal* rate on the website. The computer is spoilt right now.

**Jharkheda, Sehore**

The *sanchalak* obtains some information on agriculture through the computer. Sometimes he and fellow farmers ask what to do when there is disease in the crop. They see *mandi* rates on the computer. But they still get the transaction number on the phone. They also access websites like [www.webdunia.com](http://www.webdunia.com).

**Janpur Bavadiya, Sehore**

The *sanchalak* operated the computer a little bit but did not understand much about email. The company has given a soil testing video CD, a CD on crop information, on soyabean diseases and on other ITC-IBD products. The *sanchalak* and the secretary of the Panchayat knew that one could get the rate at different *mandis* through the internet. But they felt they needed more training in how to use the computer. “The computer is useful but we don’t know how to use it,” he said.

### **Kalukheda, Dhar**

The *sanchalak* is a graduate with a Masters degree in Commerce. He visits the *soyachoupal* website daily, checks email, provides examination results to students, and visits the webdunia.com website daily. Sometimes he checks the website of the Indian Meteorological Department and at times the soyabean meal rates. He says there is no interest in computers in the age-group above 45 years.

### **Kalasada Bujurg, Dhar**

The *sanchalak* has studied till 7<sup>th</sup> standard in middle school. His nephew who completed a Bachelors degree in Arts taught him how to use the computer. He applied to become a Chemistry teacher in the village school and received an appointment from the government. He started the *choupal* in 2002 and 10 months later the computer was installed. Initially he started with visiting the newspaper websites like Naidunia.com and Dainikbhaskar.com. A CD with information on the benefits of selling at ITC-IBD, how to obtain a soil fertility test, and how to apply for insurance through ITC-IBD were given to him. He checked rates of soyabean oil on the internet sometimes. Mostly children played games on the computer and internet for free. Three teenage boys from his family were the primary users of the computer.

## Chapter Three

### The Yellow Revolution and the Opportunity for Adivasi Assertion in Malwa

The yellow revolution created the metaphor of the “good farmer” [*acche kisan*] in Malwa, one who is scientific and highly productive. At the same time it allowed the metaphor to be used against poor adivasi farmers as a justification to push them out of agriculture by characterizing them as incapable of becoming productive farmers. This chapter explores another aspect of the yellow revolution—its relationship to adivasi agricultural labourers in Malwa. I argue that the introduction of soyabean cultivation and the subsequent intensive agricultural transformation in Madhya Pradesh, and especially in Malwa, has opened up new spaces that give adivasis, as labourers rather than farmers, an opportunity to exercise power and assert themselves in social, economic, and cultural relationships with upper caste villagers. I also suggest that the mechanisms of democratic politics provide important alternative arenas of struggle for adivasis to make claims upon the state and counteract, somewhat, the power of upper castes, but which are often ignored or derided by the language and practice of development. Despite the flawed nature of electoral politics, it has provided a space and a language of rights for adivasis to fight for their well-being, and its role must be recognized as such.

Adivasis, tribals, or scheduled tribes<sup>1</sup> are the poorest and most vulnerable social group in central India. They form 20.3% of the population of Madhya Pradesh and have

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<sup>1</sup> Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Backward Caste and Upper Caste are categories under the Indian constitution which gives reservations in government jobs and educational institutions to backward caste, scheduled caste, and scheduled tribe groups. Scheduled caste (SC) groups are the lower castes also known as *dalits* or *harijans*. Scheduled tribes are tribals or adivasis who are also considered to be lower caste. Backward caste groups are considered to be the lowest level of upper castes. There is ongoing debate on designating certain castes as backward caste and this chapter will not go into it.

historically been the most marginalized group in the state (Census of India 2001b). During pre-colonial times upper caste groups such as the Marathas, Rajputs, and Patidars migrated to central India and were granted cultivation rights by Maratha and Rajput rulers who had defeated the Mughals. Subsequently, the British confirmed these rights under the revenue settlement of Malwa and adivasis were displaced from land they commonly farmed and pushed into the hills. Even after independence, adivasis were consistently denied a right to their livelihood and control over resources such as land and water in the name of forest conservation and in the pursuit of mineral and forest wealth extraction by the state and private entrepreneurs (Baviskar 1995, Sundar 1997).

However, post-independence state-led rural development in Madhya Pradesh did focus on improving the condition of adivasis to some extent. The state redistributed land to adivasi families in the 1970s and 1980s and instituted reservations (affirmative action) in government jobs and elected offices for adivasis around the same time. Although these measures benefited some families, they failed to bring about sustained change. During the 1990s, under a long tenure of the Congress party, all government handouts such as agricultural implements, money for building toilets, etc., were targeted specifically at adivasis to bring about the development of this group. These, too, failed to make any difference to the material condition of adivasis. Similar to critiques of top-down development projects more broadly, this research argues that the failure of these policies was related to their poor design, which served more to perpetuate the institutions that implemented them rather than have any benefit whatsoever on adivasi well-being (cf. Ferguson 1994, Scott 1998).

In contrast to these failed projects, however, this research suggests that the introduction of soyabean has given adivasis of the hills and the plains an alternative avenue for asserting themselves in socioeconomic relationships with upper castes, even though many have been pushed into the role of labourers. What I will call an 'economy of haste' is created every year at the soyabean harvest due to a combination of non-human actors such as the technical characteristics of the soyabean crop, the rain, mechanized equipment, and the soil, that increase the requirement of labour and provide farmers with a very short period of time to complete the harvest. Thousands of adivasis travel from various parts of Nimar, Dhar, and Jhabua to cut the soyabean in the fields of Malwa and their labour is crucial to making the soyabean economy work. Prior to soyabean, large scale labour migration was not a facet of agriculture in Malwa. Against a history of marginalization (Sundar 1997, Baviskar 1995) and the recent informalisation and casualisation<sup>2</sup> of adivasi labour (Bremen 1996, 2007: 416-420), Harriss-White 2003), the 'economy of haste' is an anomaly where adivasis all throughout Malwa and Nimar are able to assertively negotiate the terms of work and relationships with potential employers (farmers) compared to other times of the year. More importantly, the soyabean harvest has made space for collective or group negotiation of wages and terms and conditions, a possibility that did not exist in the past. Successful negotiations by some groups that raise the wage rate benefit all labourers in general, including those adivasi labourers coming from the hills and those belonging to plains villages, even though they are enmeshed in long term relations of debt with upper castes in the village.

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<sup>2</sup> Informalisation and casualisation refer to the breakdown in patron client relationships and the freeing of employers from any social obligations towards the labourers they hire. Although used more often in urban and factory contexts, with the de-unionisation, increased hiring of contract workers with no benefits, and growing state neglect / apathy and state support to capitalists in industry as well as farmers through subsidies, it has been exacerbated in the neoliberal era. It is a recent condition in the last 20 years.

I further argue that an important alternative arena of struggle that adivasis have participated in to bring about change is that of democratic politics. Through political mobilization by adivasi activists and other groups to influence legislative policy-making at the central government level, a constitutional Act guaranteeing employment to all rural adults was passed in 2005. Formulated as an employment guarantee scheme, it was implemented in several parts of India in 2006 and 2007. In combination with the “economy of haste” in Malwa, the scheme enhanced the ability of adivasi labourers to negotiate higher wage rates with their upper caste farmer-employers in relationships during and even beyond the soyabean harvest.

This research argues that development projects which seek to constantly depoliticize their interventions and deride any engagement with politics fail to recognize politics as a crucial avenue for marginalized groups to make claims upon the state (Chatterjee 2004, 2008, Corbridge 2008). Moreover, participatory development projects that became popular in the 1990s are still not accountable towards the people who they expect to be helped. Democratic politics, on the other hand, creates the space where a differentiated, non-monolithic state is directly accountable to the people it represents. Disengagement with politics and labeling illegitimate any political action by the marginalized sets up participatory development projects to remain irrelevant to the needs and pressing concerns of the marginalized.

### **History of Settlement in Malwa and Ranipura**

Ranipura, like many other villages in Dhar and Malwa was settled about 150 or 200 years ago by families fleeing war and famine in different parts of Rajasthan from Pali, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer districts. The nearby town of Dhar was continuously under

the rule of various petty rulers ever since the Parmar dynasty of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The most famous ruler was Raja Bhoj who built the famous Bhojshala (university) in the town of Dhar. But the extent of settlement and cultivation in the surrounding villages was very small prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century—mostly they were covered with forests. After the Parmars, the area was controlled by Muslim rulers from Delhi and then by the Mughals who were defeated by various Maratha chieftains during wars fought in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Malcolm 1832). The Pawars were one of several Maratha chieftains like the Scindias and Holkars who settled down in Dhar and Dewas at the southern edge of the Malwa plateau along with several retainers and notables. The Marathas were defeated by the British in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century who converted princely states like Dhar into principalities under British protection after the third Anglo-Maratha war of 1818 (Verma 1984). During the colonial period, Malwa was under the rule of Maratha princely states such as the Holkars of Indore, Scindias of Gwalior and Pawars of Dhar and Dewas, apart from hundreds of smaller Rajput principalities, under supervision of British residents and agents. After independence, these states were amalgamated into the Indian union and became a part of the state of Madhya Pradesh in 1956.

The only “native” inhabitants of Malwa were the adivasis<sup>3</sup> who were pushed into the Vindhya mountains by the Marathas initially and then by the British. Large tracts of fertile Malwa land were then distributed to farmers from Rajasthan and Gujarat during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Baviskar 1995: 54-58, 66). In addition, the hills and forests were designated as protected areas by the British, not so much for conservation but for enabling large scale extraction of resources by the colonial (and then postcolonial) state.

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<sup>3</sup> Adivasis, especially the Bhils were said to have settled in central India from Sindh (Nath 1960), cited in Baviskar (1995) and Rahul (1996).

In the 1870s, adivasis were converted into “encroachers” on this newly reserved forest land (Prasad 2004: 31-35). They were denied access to resources such as rights to natural forest produce, prevented from swidden cultivation, and pushed into resource poor areas (Baviskar 1995: 70-71, 81-82, Sundar 1997: 105-123). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Forest Department labeled adivasi claims as ecologically destructive, ignoring its own complicity in supporting commercial extraction of forest and mineral wealth (Gadgil and Guha 1989). Under such circumstances, adivasis participated willingly and unwillingly with the representatives of the state, both colonial and post colonial, to extract resources from forests. Even today, adivasis farm hillsides in plots known as *nevad* in collusion with and despite the objection of forest officials, paying tribute to them from the meager output that comes out of farming in such degraded land and poor quality soil (Baviskar 1995: 149-156).<sup>4</sup> The practice has become increasingly unsustainable because of the state’s prior exploitation of the forest and the growing demographic pressure in the hills (Baviskar 1995: 150-152, cf. Hodgson 2001).

The village of Ranipura lies at the southern edge of the Malwa plateau in the Jhumki block of Dhar district. About 150 years ago, one family each of upper caste Rajputs, Jats, Marus, and Garis, and two adivasi families were the initial settlers who were given land by Dhar Maharaj.<sup>5</sup> Some of them further purchased land from a Muslim man who sold several hundred bigha to finance his trip to Mecca for Hajj.<sup>6</sup> The Raja had also given land to Brahmins (priests), to the guard [*chowkidar*], leather worker [*chamar*], barber [*nai*], agricultural worker [*balai*] and sweeper [*bhangi*] of the village as part of

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<sup>4</sup> I describe a similar situation later in this chapter based on my visits to the mountain villages in the Vindhya hills south of Dhar town.

<sup>5</sup> Dhar Maharaj means King of Dhar who was from the Pawar dynasty of Maratha rulers.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Anar Singhiji Rathod, August 1, 2006.



their caste duties in the village and so that they could subsist by growing maize.<sup>7</sup> By the 1950s, six more adivasi families migrated to Ranipura to work as year-long labourers (*halis*) at the houses of some Jats and Marus. Nearly all the 100 families we see today are descendants of these original groups. Many adivasi families live in the villages of Malwa, but most of them are landless labourers and do not own any land.<sup>8</sup> They have been assimilated into the dominant Hindu caste structure and do not share the distinctive cultural identity of the hill adivasis (Baviskar 1995: 88, 201, Mayer 1960). This chapter discusses both adivasis from outside (hill adivasis) and adivasis belonging to the village (Ranipura adivasis) and their relationships with upper castes. Most of the sections refer specifically to adivasis of Ranipura. The section of the “economy of haste” refers specifically to hill adivasis as well as to adivasis of Ranipura.

### **State Programs for Adivasis: Land Reforms and Job Reservations**

After independence, the Indian government abolished *zamindari*,<sup>9</sup> thus, eliminating the intermediaries between the state and the tenant-cultivator of the land. The Madhya Pradesh government enacted two pieces of legislation, the MP Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act 1960 and 1974, to ensure more equitable distribution of land (Land Reforms Unit 2002). However the state gave lip service to implementing land reform until the 1970s and 1980s, when the first set of reforms were initiated in some parts of Madhya Pradesh. Adivasi families who did not own any land in Ranipura

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Suraj Jat, Ranipura, August 27, 2006. About 15-20 years ago, Suraj’s father Ramaji Jat purchased these plots from their owners. There are no *chamar* or *bhangi* families in Ranipura any more.

<sup>8</sup> Most of these families, such as the ones living in Ranipura, came to work as labourers in the village and ended up settling there. They could have come from the mountains or they could have come from elsewhere. Many adivasis in Ranipura could not recall where their ancestors came from.

<sup>9</sup> *Zamindari* was one of the forms of land settlement under the British where the title to large tracts of land was held by absentee landlords but it was cultivated by tenants living in the villages. This form of land holding was abolished in land reform acts after independence.

received allotments ranging from 1/4<sup>th</sup> hectare (2 bigha) to 1 hectare from common grazing land and government land with permanent ownership rights and title [*patta*]. Upper caste villagers in Ranipura consistently lamented the state's largesse in the redistribution of common grazing land to adivasis and dismissed adivasis as nomads incapable of being "good farmers" [*acche kisan*]. They emphasized that Rajputs from Rajasthan, Patidars from Gujarat and Marathas from Maharashtra, the three main sets of migrants to Malwa, were invited by the local rulers to "make untitled land productive" in Malwa. The history of pushing adivasis into the forested hills was all but erased from their memories.

There were conflicting versions of when adivasis in Ranipura received their plots of land from the government. According to Ramlalji, an adivasi whose grandfather was allotted 2 bigha, 12 plots of 2 bigha each were cut from the *sarkari beed* (government owned grassland) during Indira Gandhi's time. Where the plot had poor quality soil [*halki zameen*], two and a half bigha was allotted. Moreover, he added, "6 plots of 8 bigha each were also allotted to those adivasi families whose men folk had all got the operation [vasectomy] done."<sup>10</sup> This amounted to a total of about 72-75 bigha being allotted to adivasis. Gangadhar's mother, whose husband was one of the 8 bigha allottees recalled that they got the land the year her husband died, and when Gangadhar, her only child, was two months old. We tried to calculate the year through life events that she remembered. She said Gangadhar was 6 or 7 when Indira Gandhi died in 1984, so the land was possibly given in 1977, during the last phase of the emergency when Sanjay

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ramlalji, Ranipura, October 16, 2006. The vasectomies were part of a large sterilization operation conducted across the country during the two-year period of emergency rule in India from 1975-77 under Indira Gandhi. Rohinton Mistry's book, *A Fine Balance: A Novel*, based in Bombay has a stirring account of the policy (1996).

Gandhi, Indira's son, was conducting his massive sterilization operations across the country.<sup>11</sup>

Bharat Jat, a backward caste farmer, recalled the year to be about 1975 when the 2-3 bigha land was distributed by Indira Gandhi.<sup>12</sup> Ajit Singh, an upper caste farmer mentioned that adivasis had been given *patte* in 1983-84 under the Congress chief minister Arjun Singh, which was the same time when Indira Gandhi was in power in the centre before her assassination.<sup>13</sup> Suraj Jat, the village Patel,<sup>14</sup> said that in 1980 or 82, the year his cousin got married, adivasis were given a 9 bigha *patta*.<sup>15</sup> Ajit Singh Rathod also recalled that the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh had organized a Debt Relief Program (*Rin Mukti Karyakram*) in 1980-81 where adivasis who had sold their land got it back. To prevent further land alienation it was legally decreed that adivasi land could only be sold to another adivasi and not to upper castes.<sup>16</sup> Upper castes are only allowed to lease land from adivasis.

However even though every adivasi family except one owned some land in Ranipura, four adivasi families had mortgaged their land to others and were landless for the 2006 season. A couple of the 2 bigha allottees had sold off their allotment and left the village. Two of the 8 bigha allottees had leased out their land for the entire year to upper

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Gangadhar Bhooria, his wife and his mother, Ranipura, October 11, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Bharat Jat, Ranipura, July 19, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Interview on June 27, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Patel is a hereditary title continuing from colonial times and refers to the village tax collector. Suraj Jat received the title from Ran Singh Rathod, and not from his father. None of Ran Singhji's sons wanted the title and the responsibility that went with it—entertaining all official guests who visited the village, taking care of village-related paperwork, etc. Since Ranipura was part of the Rangwasa panchayat, it did not have a *sarpanch* [village head] and the Patel was the de facto village head.

<sup>15</sup> Interview August 10, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> The priest of Ranipura was cultivating adivasi land in the village and was the de facto owner. He had worked out a deal with an adivasi family in his ancestral village in Jhabua to buy the land from the adivasi in Ranipura.

caste farmers. The sons of the other four allottees were holding the same amount of land and farming it during both the seasons. They had not divided it yet.

By 2006, many of the 2 bigha allottees had divided the land amongst two or more sons, and it was not enough to sustain the family for an entire year. The total number of labour-days required to farm one bigha of soyabean was less than two weeks.<sup>17</sup> In wheat the effort would be a little more because of the need for watering the crop periodically. But a majority of adivasi farmers did not have a tubewell in their fields. A small minority grew unirrigated wheat but most of them gave it on lease to other farmers with tubewells for the winter wheat season. Those who did farm both seasons, the total number of working days for two people would be no more than one month.

What does a one bigha farmer do for the other 11 months of the year?

A majority of adivasi families still relied upon wage labour to sustain themselves. Some adivasi men became permanent yearly servants [*hali*] at the houses of upper caste families in Ranipura. In 2006-07, twenty-seven upper caste landed households out of 100 total households in Ranipura, hired adivasi men and boys as yearly or six-monthly servants [*hali* or *naukar*]. The work was either for one year from May, or for six months from end-June until December, covering both the soyabean and wheat seasons. Adivasi women found annual employment with households for cleaning animal dung on a daily basis and making fuel cakes with it or mixing it in the *gobar* [animal dung] gas unit. The yearly or six-monthly labourer (*hali* or *naukar*) relationship for both men and women was

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<sup>17</sup> It takes two people a couple of days to plough and sow one bigha of land using bullocks. Another couple of days are required for weeding and *dora* [removing weeds using a circular wheel like apparatus]. One day to spray pesticides or maybe two if it is to be done twice, and three days for the harvest. Threshing done at the field itself by hand would take another 2-3 days. If the farmer rented a tractor, ploughing and sowing would take less an hour and threshing, too, would be over in 15 minutes.

not necessarily a long term relationship. Frequently both sides would mention that “it didn’t work out so I left [*jamaa nahi to chod diya*]” or “it didn’t work out so we hired another person [*jamaa nahi to doosre ko rakh liya*].” Usually the labourer would get the entire yearly salary, plus some extra loan if needed, in advance in April at the time of the festival of Akha Teej. If a labourer wanted to switch to someone else or leave the job altogether, he or she would have to pay back the extra loan. The new farmer employer would then give the labourer a new advance for the coming year, which would go towards settling the dues of the previous employer. Once again the labourer would take extra money for daily needs of the family and the cycle would go on (Bremner 2007).

For specific agricultural operations labour was hired on daily wages—sowing, harvest, weeding, spraying pesticides etc. Labourers were usually already loaned money in advance during the beginning of the rainy season or end of summer when food stocks were low. By this time the winter wheat had mostly been consumed and one had to wait till the end of the soyabean harvest in October to get money again. During the soyabean season, most Ranipura labourers were planting their own small plots of land and also looking out for wage work. Compared to the winter wheat season, village adivasis said the soyabean season held better prospects for work such as weeding for women and *dore chalana* and pesticide spraying for men. But if it rained for extended periods of time then no farm work would be possible. At the soyabean harvest, lasting about 15 days to one month, work was plentiful and labourers from outside Ranipura were also booked in advance by farmers to come and cut the crop.

After the soyabean season, from November to March, there was still some work available in the village. For instance, men were employed to water wheat for richer

farmers, who owned more than 4-5 hectares of land. This was usually a night job because that was when electricity was available to run the tubewell motors. They could also work at the construction of houses or buildings in the local area under the supervision of two upper caste masons of Ranipura. For women work such as weeding in wheat and working in the government-owned horticulture nursery in Ranipura was also available. A large majority of adivasis were only qualified for agricultural work or other manual labour.

After Diwali in October, it was common to hear of various seasonal migratory tales from those left behind—someone had gone to a village 10 km away to water the wheat fields for a farmer there; another three families had left for Gujarat giving their half hectare plots to the shopkeeper to cultivate on lease; two young men had started working in a shop in Dhar town, and so on. Uneducated lower caste and adivasi youths migrated to places like Pithampur and Gujarat as manual labourers. They became part of the casualised, informal migrant labour characteristically described by Breman (1996, 2007) and faced increasingly precarious situations where survival itself is in question (Baviskar 2008, Mosse et al. 2005). However, everyone would be back by April for the wedding season in the village and to sow the soyabean on their land in the rains, whatever little they got out of it. Many adivasi families managed their financial liabilities either by paying off the money through another loan from a more friendly farmer/neighbour or by mortgaging land or leasing it out for a few years and at times even postponing the final accounting [*hisaab*] for later.

Apart from land reform, the government also implemented reservations for adivasis in government jobs in the 1980 and 1990s. Although reservations for adivasis and lower castes [scheduled tribes (STs) and scheduled castes (SCs)], had been

promulgated in the Indian Constitution from 1950 onwards, they were never seriously implemented. 20% of all vacancies were reserved for adivasis and 16% for lower castes but many posts were never filled. In the past, upper caste Rajputs from two families in Ranipura had obtained several government jobs such as village multipurpose health worker, anganwadi [day care] worker, irrigation department clerk, school teacher, etc. These were permanent, secure government jobs because no one could be fired, the employees received pension until their death, and several other benefits during their lifetime. The Digvijay Singh government from 1994 stopped the entry of upper castes into government service altogether and promoted the hiring of adivasis and lower castes.<sup>18</sup>

Rajputs in Ranipura repeatedly expressed their dismay at such a step and the consequent closure of the avenue of a secure, permanent government service for their children. One adivasi family from Ranipura benefited from reservations of these posts in the 1990s. Four male members obtained posts as a forest officer, school teacher, panchayat secretary, and multipurpose health worker. Two women of the family also obtained government jobs—one is an anganwadi worker while another is an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM). However, by the mid-2000s, government jobs were few and far between and very hard to get. Nahaar, another young member from the same family described his experience in trying to get benefits from the reservations (quota) for scheduled tribes in government jobs. He said, “First I tried for a job in the police where a Rs. 60,000 bribe was demanded from me.” He then applied to the RAF (Rapid Action

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<sup>18</sup> Reservations for Other Backward Castes (OBCs) were implemented by the central government of V.P. Singh in 1990. The same year, Ramji Mahajan whose report in 1983 (Mahajan Report) recommended further reservations for OBCs in Madhya Pradesh, challenged the BJP government to implement it. Finally, the Congress government of Digvijay Singh implemented the report in 1994 and also gave 27% reservations to the OBCs (Jaffrelot 1996).

Force) where there were some published vacancies. He passed all the tests – written, physical, and interview. “I went through an agent in Dhar who told me that I need to pay 10,000 Rs. to the interviewers to get the job. We arranged for the money and gave it to him. The night before the interview the agent called and said the interviewers are asking for more money. Can you get 30,000 tomorrow morning with you? It was impossible to get so much money so quickly.” So it all fell through. The third try was for a position in the Home Guard where a bribe of Rs. 45,000 was demanded.<sup>19</sup>

Some amount of bribery, says Nahaar, is involved in obtaining almost all government jobs. His observation was supported by another Rajput family who was trying to get their son, Bhagat, into the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force). According to Bhagat’s mother, “It takes Rs. 1.5 lakhs for entry. Even near my sister’s village in Neemuch there is a CRPF post but they will also take Rs. 75,000 minimum.”<sup>20</sup> These observations were further supported by the agricultural extension officer of Ranipura, as well as my own research assistant (who was a suspended clerk in the water resources department of the Dhar government) who regaled me with stories about the price of transfers and new appointments in the Dhar district bureaucracy. The main thing that seems to have changed with the reservations (quota system) is that now scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have been given an opportunity to bribe whereas earlier only the financially better off general category (upper caste) applicants could do so. And many of the former fail to get the posts because they do not have the resources to pay such money up front.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, July 15, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, April 18, 2007.



### **State Programs for Adivasis: Handouts**

Another approach of the state has focused on giving handouts to poor and marginalised groups. Despite job reservations for adivasis in government services, most employees are still upper caste. The main complaint in popular and academic accounts regarding these schemes is that benefits are usually garnered by upper caste villagers (Gupta 1998). In addition, my research suggests that even when schemes have been targeted specifically to adivasi families, they fail because they are poorly planned with little regard for the actual condition of adivasis, and they are implemented by upper caste officials who hold patronizing attitudes towards those who are to be helped. Along the lines suggested by other critics of top-down development (Ferguson 1994, Scott 1998), this research too, argues that these government schemes represent ineffectual means of improving the condition of adivasis because adivasis do not participate either in their formulation or in their implementation.

The story about latrines in Ranipura is an example of such a failed scheme. I describe how there is a disconnect between upper caste government employees' expectations of how adivasis should behave and adivasis own behaviour in the constrained circumstances they find themselves in. According to Ranipura's panchayat statistics, in 2003, 14 adivasi families in the village have been given material worth Rs. 500 (\$12) to make a latrine. Every family was asked to dig a 3-5 feet deep pit near their house, which almost everyone did. Two *farshi* (red stone measuring 2x2 feet approximately) were to be placed side by side covering the pit. One *murga* (the white ceramic stone pot which is placed between the two *farshi*) was fixed to them with cement. They were given one pipe, 400 bricks (although most families said it was

between 150 and 250), cement and sand. The bricks were to be laid around the pit walls to give them stability. It was meant to be a *kacchi* latrine, i.e., not a flush toilet. The waste would collect and rot in the pit. The latrine works for about 3 years and when the pit fills up it has to be closed for 6 months before digging out the pit again.

During interviews with my field assistant in January 2007, two of the 14 families did not mention that they had been given material to make a latrine; two others acknowledged it but said the material has all been lost here and there and there is no latrine. Some said they got the *farshi* but no *murga*, others got the *murga* but nothing else, still others did not get any bricks and sand, and poor old Budi *bua*<sup>21</sup> got nothing at all. She told my assistant, “I paid 50 rupees to dig the pit and then had to get it covered again. Can you ask madam to get me a room-type latrine made [*mere ko kamrewali acchi latrine banva de*]?” Jayaram ba and Raju Makwana said that because it was *kacchi*, the latrine smelt very bad so they only used it to take a bath and wash clothes. They have placed the *farshis* in one corner and have made a covered area with jute bags and plastic tarp. “If it was a flush latrine we would have used it properly,” said Raju. The lone person who actually built the latrine with his own hard work was Paras Ramji Makwana. He said he was given 250 bricks, one *murga*, 2 *farshi*, and one pipe. Unfortunately for him there was a drain nearby and the entire 3 feet pit got filled with water. So he had to dismantle everything.

Ultimately, of the 14 households, not a single family had a latrine during my fieldwork in 2006. What went wrong? For starters, the panchayat did not give enough bricks to make a wall around the latrine. The first time I discussed this with him, the

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<sup>21</sup> *Bua* is father’s sister—she was called that respectfully as she was living in her maternal village.

Panchayat Secretary [*mantri*] himself acknowledged, “If we would have given them a room-type, it may work. In the open area no one will use it.”<sup>22</sup> During our next discussion, he commented, “They would prefer to go out in the fields rather than go in this type of latrine [*Yahan pe nahi jamta, bahar hi jamta hai*]. They want the latrine which costs 5000 rupees to make. ...They sold the *farshi* and *murge* [plural] to rich people in Ranipura. They could have used it. Ladies could have used it. Guests could have. But they didn’t make it.”<sup>23</sup>

Baghelji, the rural agricultural extension officer (RAEO) of Ranipura was also with us in the meeting with the secretary. We were sitting in the Panchayat office on broken chairs. The office hadn’t been cleaned in weeks. He first commented on the secretary’s tirade—“Can one make a latrine in 500 rupees madam [*500 rupaiye mein kya latrine banti hai madam?*]” He then informed us that the amount has been increased to 1200 rupees. My field assistant interviewed all the villagers in Ranipura about latrines. 23 households out of 100 had some form of latrine. The average cost of a latrine (both *kacchi* and flush) was Rs. 15000. The cheapest was made for Rs. 7000 and the most expensive was Rs. 22000. Even taking into account inflated reporting, this is a far cry from 500 rupees and 1200 rupees. It does not seem surprising then that the *murge* are all lying on the roof of the adivasi houses. The adivasi households understand that only too well. Arun Makwana told us, “There was a fund of Rs. 500 to make one latrine. If it was intended to be of good quality the expense would have been at least Rs. 15000.” Even in the 500 rupee scheme not every family received all the material and equipment it had expected to get.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Panchayat Secretary, Rangwasa and Ranipura Panchayat, At *anganwadi*, October 31, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Panchayat Secretary, Rangwasa and Ranipura Panchayat, November 5, 2006.

Baghelji had given us a detailed interview about his involvement in the village the day before. He had told us about another latrine scheme. Under the Village Cleanliness Scheme [*Grameen Swachchata Abhiyaan*] 15 adivasi households got 1500 Rs worth of material to make a flush latrine in Ranipura in 2002. They were given *farshi*, *murga*, pipes, door etc. from the Public Health Department. But even then no one made the latrine save a handful of people, amongst them Paras Ramji Makwana's elder brother. Baghelji surmised, "Tribals and SCs [scheduled castes] don't like to go to the bathroom in a box. They want to go under the sky." He added, "They don't take a bath everyday. They don't brush their teeth—maybe they chew *datun* or neem *ki lakdi* [*datun* or neem tree bark were often used in the past to clean teeth]. So there is so much illness. They don't use soap, maybe they clean their hair with mud,<sup>24</sup> a bath means a dip in the pond [*talaab mein dubki*]. In my 10 years coming to this village there has been no improvement [*sudhaar*]."<sup>25</sup>

Baghelji was an upper caste Rajput but he was certainly not an idle government employee. He had made utmost efforts to provide farmers in Ranipura with material and subsidies from the agricultural department, from agricultural implements, seeds, pesticides to biogas units and sprinkler systems. During the same interview he described how he tried to give support to adivasi households at the beginning of his tenure in Ranipura—but the response was very poor. He complained that they would sell the objects received to other people involved—for instance, bricks to build a compost pit had been sold or used to make houses or bathrooms. I saw Baghelji distribute plastic fly traps to villagers and asked him why he did not give any to the adivasi households. I felt that

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<sup>24</sup> Before soap and shampoo upper and lower caste women in Ranipura cleaned their hair with a particular type of mud.

<sup>25</sup> Baghelji, November 4, 2006.

adivasis, who cannot afford to buy expensive pesticides, would benefit most in reducing pests with these traps. But Baghelji replied that the parents will dump whatever I give them somewhere and not use it [*patak denge*] and the kids will then sell the plastic for a couple of rupees worth of ice candy sticks [*gola*].

Back at the Panchayat office Baghelji took out some photographs. Two years ago he had distributed free bullock-related agricultural implements under a government scheme. I recognized several Makwana family members and other adivasis from Ranipura in the pictures, proudly standing next to or holding bright green coloured ploughs, seed drills [*tirphan*], and rakes [*bakkhar* and *dora*]. Baghelji had mentioned this to me at the start of the 2006 soyabean sowing season but I did not see even one of these objects being used at the fields. When I asked him about it, he explained, “Most of the adivasis have very little land. They don’t own bullocks. So they rent out a tractor to do the sowing. ...Since the equipment was free, i.e. it did not require a co-payment from farmers, everyone took it.”

However, during the sowing in 2006 many families used bullocks but not the free equipment. When I asked them about it, one farmer mentioned that the spacing between the three teeth of the rake was too wide and he had to take it apart to refashion it in the way he required to make it usable. The scientifically recommended spacing, which the rake was manufactured at, was 18 inches, while the farmer had planted his soyabean in rows separated by 8-12 inches only. Another farmer said that the plough was too heavy for his not-so-well nourished bullock to pull. It will sow the seed 4 inches deep and not 2 inches as required. I surmised that he could have rented a healthy bullock from a richer

farmer but he was using his old wooden plough instead.<sup>26</sup> Bullocks can usually be rented for free from a family where one works as a yearly labourer [*hali*] but not otherwise.

A few months later, at an agricultural fair in Dhar, I had the opportunity to meet the Senior [*Varisht*] Agricultural Development Officer (SADO) of Dhar, the head of all the RAEOs like Baghelji. Four other RAEOs were also present.<sup>27</sup> I mentioned that a couple of farmers in Ranipura found the iron ploughs and rakes distributed by the department to be too heavy for their feeble bullocks. The fair also had the stall of the Agricultural Equipment Department [*Yantriki Vibhag*] and we asked them about it. One of them replied that they made it at the designated government weight of 90 kg and farmers should have strong bullocks who can take the load. “But poor farmers don’t have strong bullocks,” I countered, “especially those who are eligible for such a subsidy from the government. If they did, they would be capable enough of renting a tractor.” The officials there agreed with me that this was a problem. But the SADO expressed his inability to do anything about it. He said, “We get targets from above [*upar se*] and the policy is set from above. We have to distribute it. It is not our responsibility to see if it is used or not. ...Some farmers sell these things and make money also.”

Both these instances display indifference on the part of local government officials towards the conditions of adivasis. “We cannot take the responsibility,” they seem to say. Planning is done from above and our job is only implementation, they argue. Officials designing these schemes can find out about actual lived experiences of adivasis from local officials. But local officials are not empowered to communicate such information

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews with Ajab bhai Suvan, December 6, 2006 and Arun Makwana, January 12, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Discussion with Dilip Singh More, *Varisht Krishi Vikas Adhikari* (SADO), Dhar Block and four RAEOs of Tirla, Ghatabillod, Utavad, and Anaradh, at the Krishi Mela sponsored by Nirala Hindustan, a local newspaper, October 15, 2006.

and more importantly, their views are inherently biased against adivasis in general. Planners themselves may have budgetary or political considerations in mind rather than a desire for supporting poor adivasis.

The words of the SADO reminded me of a similar conversation I had with scientists at the Agricultural College in Sehore district and the National Research Centre for Soyabean in Indore. Scientists were not expected to interact with farmers nor disseminate their work except through academic publications. They said it is not our responsibility to ensure that new seed varieties reach farmers in all areas. We are happy to meet those who come to the institute and extend all support possible to them. It was, instead, the responsibility of the agricultural department officials, especially those in extension (like the SADO and RAEOs) to obtain training on new scientific innovations and information about new varieties and transmit that information to farmers. One of the primary rationales for scientific research in agriculture is the benefit it is supposed to bring to farmers, since it is funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and is mostly undertaken by government-sponsored agricultural research institutes. Yet, scientists are not accountable to farmers. In practice, their research agenda is not decided on the basis of farmers' requirements or elicited needs, but rather on their own professionalisation requirements,<sup>28</sup> which are in turn shaped by bureaucratic expectations of performance, norms of promotions and permanent tenure.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I owe this insight to Karan Singh Pawar.

<sup>29</sup> The lack of incentives for higher performance and the early security of tenure were two points raised by one scientist as reasons for poor results in government research institutes. He had left his government position and joined a private pesticide manufacturing firm at the time of the interview. This issue is a much broader one and this chapter will not go into it in any further detail.

The following incident about the distribution of water pumpsets to adivasis in the mountain village of Khandan Buzurg poignantly illustrates how the system fails to meet the needs of adivasis, and instead, serves the needs of the government employees. These employees have to meet the targets laid out by the department to justify their work and obtain their salaries, in an environment where the government is under pressure to show results while being down-sized at the same time.<sup>30</sup> During the rainy season in August 2006 I learnt about an agricultural department meeting in honour of Balram Divas.<sup>31</sup> This was to celebrate the birthday of Lord Balram who was the brother of Lord Krishna, and known as the tiller of the soil. His idol is normally shown with a plough. The meeting was in Jhumki, the block headquarters in which Ranipura was located. Nearly 75% of the farmers in Jhumki block are adivasis and the meeting was focused on adivasis from the mountainous villages in the Satpura range, south of Ranipura (around Semlipura where I visited with Suraj Jat).

About 80-100 adivasi farmers were there, many of them old and withered with scraggly faces, white hair and large, colourful turbans. A group of young farmers sat towards the back. Several scientists spoke to the gathering and so did the local Block Development Officer and Jhumki block officials. It was only when the time for pumpset distribution came that I realized a large group of about 25 adivasis from one village were there in the audience only to get their free water pumpset—a monetary benefit of Rs. 20,000. The pumpset or motor was meant for drawing water from wells, canals and

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<sup>30</sup> This was particularly true during the 10-year regime of Digvijay Singh of the Congress party from 1993-2003. The BJP government from 2003 onwards has rolled back many of his cost-cutting measures and pro-adivasi measures, including re-opening hiring into government rolls of upper castes (for the post of *patwari* [land-records keeper] and school teachers) and re-forming departments that Digvijay Singh had dissolved. Phone conversation with Suraj Jat, December 4, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> It was held on August 25, 2006.



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rivers. It was not a submersible pump, the kind used in tubewells. The officials had selected one young man who was to be given the pumpset by the Tirla Janpad Officer, an adivasi lady. The young man was wearing a bright red shirt, jeans, and sported long hair like India's current cricketing sensation Mahendra Singh Dhoni.



A young adivasi farmer (sitting on left) being given a free pumpset by the Tirla Block Officer (lady bending down on the far right) during the Balram Divas meeting organized by the Department of Agriculture, Dhar district. August 2006. Photo by Richa Kumar

As the photographers crowded around them, the Additional Agricultural Development Officer announced on the mike, "Please use the pumpset. Do not sell it. This is a central government scheme. We will come next year and check the serial number of every pumpset to see if it is still there." I couldn't hide my astonishment. The department was giving away Rs. 20,000 (\$500) worth of material and begging farmers

not to sell it? Well, it turned out that farmers were not happy with this pumpset. One farmer asked why they could not be given a submersible pumpset. The officer explained, “The department only has Rs. 20,000 worth of subsidy and in that you cannot buy a 30,000 rupee submersible pumpset for tubewells.” Ironically, in Dhar, tubewell drilling is not allowed in two blocks because of the over-extraction of ground water (see chapter one). So the department should not be giving out submersible pumps. But on the other hand, farmers did not seem to think that these pumpsets were going to be useful. It might make most practical sense for them sell them for cash. It was precisely such behaviour that prejudiced upper caste officials like Baghelji. He insisted that during his 10-year tenure in the village, adivasis had not changed at all. “They are only interested in drink, madam. They will sell these things and in 8 days they would have finished the money. They buy *mahua* [leaves that are brewed into a local intoxicating drink] and make drinks. All adivasis are in the same condition.”<sup>32</sup>

Upper caste officials evaluated the behaviour of adivasis by narrowly focusing on what they did with various objects they received. Such officials did not broaden their view to question the structure of the agricultural department and their own position within it in perpetuating policies that only seemed to benefit the department itself. Instead, they laid the blame squarely upon adivasis themselves and argued that adivasis did not make serious efforts to improve themselves. In the process, they questioned the goal of the state to help this group at all (cf. Sharma 2008). Nor did they see the social and structural constraints faced by adivasi families trying to eke out a living.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, November 4, 2006.

### **Living Conditions of Adivasis**

Despite the programs of the state to improve their condition, adivasis have remained amongst the poorest of the poor. In the mountain villages in the *doonger* [jungle] south of Ranipura, adivasi families lived in houses whose walls were all made of thin wood covered with thatch and mud plastered on them. I traveled with Suraj Jat, the Patel of Ranipura, to the villages around Semlipura in August 2006, where he was going to book his labour for harvest. The whole place was so beautiful with lovely *sangwan* [trees] on the mountains, in places where they had not been cleared to make way for fields. But this lovely view was probably only in the monsoons; after that it must be hot and dry and dreadful. I was told that plastered mud walls were better than unbaked bricks because the latter were more easily washed away in the rains. The roof was typically made of local unbaked tiles [*kavelu*]. There were very few brick houses. Inside, they would typically have mud enclosures to store grain and a few utensils. There were very few other belongings.

These families usually farmed small plots of half a hectare or less of their own in the mountains. They had encroached upon this land illegally as it was conserved forest land under the Forest Department. We saw in Semlipura newly felled trees in July. It was generally done in the monsoon season so that officials did not come to investigate. The next year that would become a farm. Adivasis would burn the wood and other things on the land so that the officials would assess their fines for wood loss with leniency. The land was sloping between 10-40 degrees with very shallow red soil covered by small stones and pebbles. The cultivation would be done using bullocks, which maneuvered their way around the tiny sloping plots with the weight of the plough on their backs.

There were no terraces, just sloping fields. Rain water would wash down the slopes but according to the adivasi farmers, the small stones would prevent soil erosion so there was no need to build mud or stone bunds. The output in such plots would be on average 1-2 quintal per bigha and a better plot may yield maximum 3-4 quintal soyabean. Whereas in Ranipura the average was between 3-4 quintal a bigha and a good plot could yield 5-6 quintal of soyabean.

In 2006, all adivasis in Ranipura lived in *kaccha* houses without latrines. Their children were poorly clad and poorly fed. Noses running, clothed in rags, unclean hands and feet, and protruding bellies was not an uncommon sight. Even at the day care centre [*anganwadi*] in the village, adivasi kids below 5 years of age were a heart-wrenching sight and in striking contrast to the children who went to the private nursery school in the village.<sup>33</sup> There is a clear physical division of the village between adivasi and upper caste areas. Seemingly, even dogs did not cross this invisible line across either side. In 2006, the upper caste area had a full cemented road [*kharanja*], a functioning water tank, two temples, and a few *pacca* houses. The adivasi section, known as the *tapra*, had a muddy path [*keechad*] covered with puddles made from uneven footsteps and animal dung. On either side it was lined with a broken water tank, *kaccha* houses, and the crumbling government school, with 80% adivasi enrolment.<sup>34</sup> Small children took out the goats for grazing in the fields and many of them did not go to school even though it was next door.

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<sup>33</sup> Two adivasi children went to the private nursery school also and a handful of upper caste children came to the *anganwadi*. The latter were definitely better dressed but again, buttons were fallen off or zippers were not working and at times the dresses were soiled. It was usually a function of how much time and effort their mothers were able to give to the task of washing clothes, which could only be done by carrying the entire load to the village pond.

<sup>34</sup> The entire village was usually infested with flies, a little more so in the adivasi area. My notebooks have water stains in most places where I interviewed adivasi families as the roofs leaked in the rains. There were

With no latrines, adivasis cleaned at the village pond and a particular area near the tapra always smelled bad. During the summer when the pond dried up they went to the handful of tubewells that were still functioning to collect drinking water and at times to bathe and clean. The women cooked on wood fires or used animal dung cakes for fuel. Some families owned a small number of animals and milk was a rare commodity. During the day only small children and two old widows were around—the children came back from the *anganwadi* by noon. Their parents were both out working as daily labourers (*dahadki*).

With the redistribution of grazing land and the introduction of soyabean cultivation, adivasis in Ranipura have been able to fare much better in the last 40 years. With cash from the sale of soyabean, and with concrete options for employment outside the village, at least some adivasis have fulfilled their consumerist aspirations. Since 2006, items such as motorcycles, mobile phones, and cable television have come to households in the tapra, and subsequently gone away again as the fortunes of the families who own them rise and fall. At the same time, most households did not have strong wooden *khats* [beds] to sleep on, their roofs were almost always leaking in the monsoons because they were not replenished with fresh straw and unbaked bricks, and their few personal possessions such as clothes and shoes would get muddy and wear out within less than a month of use. Surprisingly, this cyclical nature of ownership extended even to the houses themselves. It became a common sight to see different *tapra* houses in various states of collapse months after having been rebuilt.

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no latrines in many upper caste households too, so certain other designated areas near the main village also smelled bad.

In a conversation with two upper caste Rajput brothers—Dheeraj Singh and Virendra Singh (who was a farmer)—our discussion ventured towards adivasis.<sup>35</sup> They said, “20 years ago they were unclean, their environment was unclean. Today they are still unclean.” Dheeraj Singh added, “See their area of the village. They should not be given seats in the Panchayat. They can’t do any good for the village. They do not have enough to eat and they have been made head of the Parent Teacher Association of the school [*Khane ko nahi hai aur Shikshak Palak sangh ke upadhyaksh bana diye gaye hain* i.e., the school management will be degraded].” I responded by asking them, “There is no road in their side of the village so how can that area be clean? If there is a road then automatically cleanliness will come.” Dheeraj Singh seemed to agree. He said, “Earlier when we also didn’t have a road we would throw garbage just outside the house.”

I asked him “How come there is no road there?” So Dheeraj Singh explained that the roads have been built in sections. “The funds we got were for this part only. The section near Suraj Jat’s house (covering three adivasi and four Maru families) has been built with funds obtained from Vikram Verma’s MP fund.” Suraj Jat, the Patel, had a special relationship with Verma, who was from the Hindu nationalist BJP party. Suraj was his right hand man in the Jhumki Block, where Ranipura was situated. Another part was made using money from the MLA (representative to the state assembly) fund of Karan Singh Pawar when he was the Congress MLA between 1998 and 2003. A third part in front of the Rathod houses till the temple was made using money from another politician, Rajkade. “We asked for money from the MLA [*Vidhayak*] for building a road in our area only. The adivasis haven’t been involved [*jude hue* – associated] with the

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Dheeraj Singh and Virendra Singh Rathod, Ranipura, August 5, 2006.

*Vidhayaks* i.e., helped them in elections etc. They are involved now. Once their association becomes longer (right now its just 5 years) then they will also get funds for a road.”

After this interaction, I never expected the road in the *tapra* area to be built any time soon. But ironically, less than a year later, in April 2007, under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, funds from the central government were used to build a road in the adivasi section of Ranipura. The secretary of Ranipura told me, “I got it sanctioned because the school teachers used to find it very difficult [*aafat aati thi*] to get to school in the rainy season. There was mud [*keechad*] everywhere.” The road made a huge difference to mobility and cleanliness in the area, especially in the monsoons. But during the monsoon of 2007, despite the new road or possibly because of drainage issues relating to it, the entire *tapra* area was under water for four days.<sup>36</sup> The *tapra* houses were all situated next to the village pond. The boundary of the pond developed a leak and there was no other outlet to channel the water away from all the adivasi houses. Several houses where water remained throughout the monsoon were inhabitable after that. These were amongst the poorest people in the village who were forced to keep rebuilding their houses repeatedly.

Neeta and Vijay, two adivasi siblings said that in places like Pithampur, an industrial town 50 kilometers away, caste discrimination has been reduced a great deal. Vijay, who works as a mason there, says he goes anywhere in houses of people and even makes tea in other people’s kitchens. In the village, says Neeta, adivasis cannot go into

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<sup>36</sup> Rama bai, who lived in the *tapra*, had complained to me earlier that the road had been built without giving too much thought to the drainage of water in the monsoons. I was not able to find out whether the flooding was because of the road or due to other reasons.

the kitchen, the bedroom or the prayer room, else the entire house will have to be cleaned for purification. Upper caste people won't eat food in a restaurant if they know (from the symbols, the name, or through word of mouth) that it belongs to a lower caste person. At tea shops and in houses, the water glass and the tea cup for adivasis is separate. Neeta adds that education has brought change. So have visits to the city where people get to see different things. But Ashok Maru, a backward caste farmer who sends his children to the government school in the village despite being able to afford a private education, and seems to share sympathies with the adivasis says, "The gap will not close." He had stopped by Vijay's hut in the adivasi section of the village during our discussion there. However, the possibilities opened up through democratic politics, as suggested by the Rathod brothers earlier, have given an alternative avenue for adivasis to make claims upon the state for obtaining benefits and improving their well-being. In the next section, I discuss the participation, or lack thereof, of adivasis in this arena in Madhya Pradesh.

### **Absence of Independent Political Mobilisation**

Despite consistent discrimination against adivasis and their state of poverty, Malwa has not witnessed independent political mobilization by adivasi groups against upper castes or against the state. Adivasis are nearly 20% of the population of Madhya Pradesh and in some parts of western Malwa and Nimar they form 60% of the total population. Non-political movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which was fighting against the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada river have been restricted to the Nimar plains and the hill adivasis in Jhabua district. It has also disintegrated in the last few years after adverse judgements by the Supreme Court of India leading to submergence of large areas (Baviskar 2004: 276). The Khedut Mazdoor



Chetna Sangath has been focused amongst the hill adivasis of Jhabua. But in the plains of Malwa, most adivasi leaders have been co-opted by the two main political parties in the state—the Congress and the BJP (Pai 2004). Even adivasis who are elected from reserved constituencies (where only an adivasi can contest elections) enter the fray on a ticket from one of the two political parties (Jaffrelot 1998, Gupta 2005). Kela (2003) argues that the tiny adivasi elite that is able to take advantage of reservations is co-opted by the state and resistance from the mass of the poor adivasis is thus, resisted and defused.

Madhya Pradesh was created in 1956 with everything that was left over after the linguistic reorganization of the states around it. It was a fractious union of leftover areas made up of princely states in Malwa and Bundelkhand, and some tribal areas in the erstwhile Central Provinces, termed Mahakoshal and Chattisgarh (which became an independent state in 2000). Even this division of the state does not do justice to the variety of geographies, crops, rainfall patterns, ecology, culture, language, and food that make up Madhya Pradesh. Debates about dividing the state into political units have illustrated the continued influence of administrative divisions from the colonial era—many erstwhile rulers of princely states are still active politicians from the state<sup>37</sup>—crosscutting against cultural and ecologically cohesive regions, thus discouraging the formation of contiguous units of adivasi affinity (Jaffrelot 1996a, Rahul 1996a, Rahul 1996b, Jaffrelot 1996b).

A tribal political party, the Gondwana Ganatantra Party (GGP) was formed in eastern Madhya Pradesh and fought in several elections since the 1990s, even winning a

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<sup>37</sup> Digvijay Singh hailed from Raghogarh, Arjun Singh from Churhat, Madhav Rao Scindia and his son Jyotiraditya Scindia from Gwalior, Karan Singh Pawar from Dhar, Tukoji Rao Pawar from Dewas, Shankar Pratap Singh from Chattarpur, and Rajvardhan Singh from Dattigaon in Badnavar (Press Trust of India 2003).

few seats (Ramshankar 2004). But the adivasis of the eastern part, the Gonds, are different in their cultural, social, ecological histories from the adivasis of Malwa and Nimar, the Bhils and Bhilalas, in the western part of the state (Baviskar 2005, Guha 2007). Moreover, party politics in Madhya Pradesh has seen endemic and endless factionalism within all its political parties. Even the tribal GGP broke up into factions early in 2008, possibly engineered by some Congress leaders, and has not been able to increase its influence beyond eastern Madhya Pradesh (Ray 2008, Ghosh 2008).

With the redistribution of land to labouring adivasi families in parts of Malwa during the tenure of various Congress governments, they have consistently been a Congress votebank. The adivasis of Ranipura remember Mrs. Indira Gandhi as “the one who did something for us.” Neeta and Vijay Mana, young adivasi siblings whose grandparents had benefited from a 2 bigha allotment emphasized her importance to me, “Indira Gandhi is raising us. She gave us land, she gave us subsidized food through ration shops, all is given by her [Indira Gandhi *paal rahi hai—patta diya, anaj aa raha hai control se, sab Indira Gandhi ke den hai*].” Neeta got married a few years ago and has one daughter. Vijay is about 18 years old and is working as a mason in Pithampur (the industrial township or Special Economic Zone in Dhar district). He adds, “Her son [Rajiv Gandhi] was good too.” He hasn’t heard the name of the current MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly of Madhya Pradesh) of Dhar or whether he ever came to visit the village. But all they need to know is, as Neeta puts it, “If/When you vote, stamp on the symbol of the hand (the Congress party symbol) [vote *dena haath ko punja mein dena*].”

But since the late 1980s, the BJP made several efforts to change the scenario. Although Malwa had traditionally been a BJP stronghold, especially in urban areas like

Indore and Ujjain where trading castes were historically powerful, the party was weak in rural areas. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) *pracharaks* played an important role in popularizing gods like Hanuman and Ram from the Hindu pantheon and celebrating festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Navratri in the hill areas of Jhabua (Baviskar 2005). During a visit to the mountain villages around Semlipura in Dhar district with Suraj Jat we passed by various people he knew—the greeting was “Ram Ram” and not “Namaskar.”<sup>38</sup> Suraj told us that a lot of work has been done in this region to introduce adivasis to Ram and Hanuman. They did not know about these gods earlier, he explained, and said he was very proud of the work done by the BJP and RSS to promote Hinduism.<sup>39</sup> Increasingly, the mobilization of adivasis through political parties in the 1990s started taking place around issues of religion rather than caste and socioeconomic deprivation (Baviskar 2005).

Known as *doonger ka neta* [politician of the jungle], Suraj Jat and his late father had always been with the BJP. The horns of his bullocks in Ranipura were coloured in the colours of the BJP’s party flag. His 12-year old younger son, I was told, burned all Congress posters and leaflets that he found. Vikram Verma, a Jat farmer from Dharmapuri in Dhar district was elected on a Jan Sangh ticket to the state legislative assembly from Dhar constituency for the first time in 1977, right after the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi was lifted. Later the Jan Sangh was re-christened as the BJP. Verma lost the elections in 1985 but won again in 1990 and 1993. Suraj aggressively campaigned for him in the adivasi villages in the mountains for every election in the

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<sup>38</sup> Amita Baviskar has described the rituals of Bhilala adivasis in her area of research in Jhabua district. These were usually related to spirits and gods with a strong connection to nature and the physical landscape. The Bhils of Semlipura may have different rituals but these would also be largely associated with natural phenomena.

<sup>39</sup> August 3, 2006.

1990s, spending his own money traversing the villages around Semlipura several times. He considered Verma, who is from the same caste, to be his mentor and obtained benefits for Ranipura through Verma's MLA fund including a water tank and part of a paved road in front of his house (discussed above).

During the 2003 elections, despite Hindutva or Hindu nationalism not becoming a major poll issue in other parts of Madhya Pradesh (Manor 2004), the fate of the Bhojshala, a historic structure in the heart of Dhar town, became the focus of debate in Dhar. The Bhojshala, literally translated as the University of Bhoj is said to have been built during the reign of King Bhoj of the Parmar dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is a rectangular shaped open space covered with red sandstone tiles and encircled on all sides by a pillared corridor. In the middle is a small square platform. On one side of the rectangle there is a larger assembly hall with a set of stairs leading to a small pulpit, and an alcove where, it is presumed, a small two-feet statue made of eight metals [*ashtdhatu*] of Goddess Saraswati stood. She is the goddess of learning. The statue is housed in the Royal Museum of London today. Once a year on the festival of Basant Panchami, Hindus congregated at the Bhojshala to offer prayers for the birth of Goddess Saraswati.

In the 1950s, Muslims of Dhar were given the privilege of holding prayers in the then empty, decrepit Bhojshala premises every Friday by the Dewan, Shri Nadkar, of the late Raja Anand Rao Pawar because the *dargah* next to the Bhojshala had become too small for the faithful to offer prayers. With the rise of the Ayodhya Ram Mandir issue<sup>40</sup> as a point of mobilization by the BJP in the early 1990s, the Bhojshala became the

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<sup>40</sup> A temple in Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, the birthplace of Lord Ram, had been razed to the ground and a mosque built on the site by the Mughal emperor Babur in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The BJP's followers demolished the mosque in 1992 and built a makeshift temple on the spot. Today the site is a disputed structure.

Ayodhya of Madhya Pradesh. The BJP called for halting all Muslim prayers in the premises of the Bhojshala and started several agitations to make their point heard. In 1995, Digvijay Singh, the Congress chief minister banned the entry of Hindus into the Bhojshala altogether, except on Basant Panchami day. Muslims were only allowed to enter on Fridays. The Bhojshala issue remained a focal point for mobilization by the RSS, and in 2002, it was opened for Hindus to pray every Tuesday.

In the 2003 elections the BJP successfully made this an important election plank. Uma Bharati, the charismatic leader of the party pledged in the election manifesto to bring back the statue of Goddess Saraswati from London and install it in the Bhojshala. According to Karan Singh Pawar, the Congress candidate from Dhar constituency who lost the election to the BJP, a remark by the Congress chief minister Arjun Singh that the Bhojshala was a mosque, was an important factor in his loss.<sup>41</sup>

In 2006, the festival of Basant Panchami fell on a Friday creating a conflict with both Hindus and Muslims desiring to offer prayers in the Bhojshala. Although the BJP ruled over Madhya Pradesh, since 2004 the Congress party and its allies had formed the central government in Delhi. Amidst threats by the Congress to impose President's rule and dissolve the elected BJP government if Muslims were not allowed to say prayers or if riots broke out, the BJP government had its hands tied. In the ensuing drama, the state BJP government was forced to orchestrate a short reading of Muslim prayers alongside day-long Hindu prayers all the while trying to quell a riot amongst thousands of Hindu villagers who had congregated outside the Bhojshala from all over the district. The

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<sup>41</sup> In the 2008 elections, Hindutva has once again risen to the top of the agenda of all parties with the arrest of a priestess with suspicious links to terrorist activities (CNN-IBN 2008). Uma Bharati, who broke away from the BJP and floated her own Bharatiya Jan Shakti Party, offered an election ticket to the priestess for the assembly polls (Times of India 2008).

participants of the “*Chalo Bhojshala*” [March to the Bhojshala] campaign were lathi-charged by the police and had to beat a hasty retreat. Amongst them were 10 villagers from Ranipura along with a few hundred adivasis from the mountain villages, all led by Suraj Jat. He had been working on the advice of Vikram Verma, who was by 2006 the Rajya Sabha MP from Dhar constituency and had shifted his base to Delhi. Mobilisation of adivasis for the BJP cause seems to have been taken up strongly by Suraj Jat, as is suggested by the story of the Ram temple in Ranipura.

In 2000, Ranipura villagers, led by Suraj Jat starting collecting funds to renovate the Ram temple in the village. They had done it for the Tejaji temple, the temple of the snake god revered by the Jats, in the 1990s. Renovation of temples is an activity conducted in many Malwa villages but is usually conducted by upper caste villagers. Lower castes and adivasis are generally barred from entry to temples and their participation in rebuilding activities is not encouraged. In Ranipura, however, the activity was not restricted to upper caste villagers, as is the usual case, but adivasis and lower castes were also included. Villagers give a small share of soyabean and wheat to the collective pool each year to fund this initiative. The money collected is then disbursed as loans to all villagers at 24% per annum, an interest rate equivalent to informal money lending rates in Malwa.<sup>42</sup> Every year the money is returned and then re-loaned to keep the fund going. The entire village participates in the temple fund, contributing money and borrowing and returning loans, in what is proudly and moralistically claimed as an “[all-inclusive] village activity [*gaon ka karya*].”

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<sup>42</sup> This amount, while seemingly high, compared favourably with rates charged by moneylenders, which could range from 24%-60% per annum. Such high interest rates are a primary mechanism which helps keep lower castes and other poor villagers in a weaker economic position and makes it more difficult for them to recover from financial losses.

It is deeply surprising that adivasis have been included in contributing money for a temple where they are not allowed access for holding or attending religious events. The younger generation can sit on the main platform [*otla*] without objection during secular events, such as a meeting called by the agricultural department. But they are usually barred from sitting at the temple to attend or hold religious events. For instance, a faith-based movement known as *Swadhyay* that was started in Ranipura by upper caste Rajputs, held weekly religious meetings at the Ram temple. Initially when only upper castes were involved, there was no difficulty in the location. When the movement started to include adivasis, those upper castes not associated with *Swadhyay* raised objections to adivasis sitting at the temple. This was compounded by the fact that two of the most vehement disapprovers lived right next to the Ram temple and would create a scene whenever adivasis came to the meeting. Consequently, a separate meeting schedule was created specifically for adivasi men and women and was conducted in one of the adivasi houses in the *tapra*.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, during Ganesh *Chaturthi*, one of the most important festivals in Malwa, the upper caste palanquin housing an idol of Lord Ganesh was given a place of honour at the Ram temple. Adivasis living in the *tapra* never came by to the upper caste side to pray. Instead, they had built their own Ganesh palanquin which sat in the middle of adivasi households. Only one set of the Makwana adivasi households whose houses were contiguous to the main village and who were amongst the financially better off adivasis in the village, were allowed to pray in front of the upper caste Ganesh palanquin as it

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Seema Rathod, Ranipura, October 17, 2007.

traversed through their locality in a procession around the village. The upper caste palanquin did not go towards the *tapra* at all.

Suraj Jat was the one who got the adivasis and the scheduled castes involved in the Ram temple fund. One explanation I was given was that this would help the money to multiply faster—at least with the involvement of some of the better-off households. I was surprised to learn that in 2006, the share of the total temple fund taken on loan by adivasi and lower caste families was 30%, which was a huge amount considering that their religious involvement in the temple was minimal. On the other hand, there were suggestions from some upper caste villagers that Suraj Jat had involved the adivasis because he was trying to cultivate a BJP vote bank in the village. Historically, adivasis were staunch Congress supporters because, as they said, Indira Gandhi was the one who gave them land with rightful ownership. Suraj provided young adivasis in the village with funds to participate in an acrobatic festival and took them to acrobatic contests in BJP coloured T-shirts. He supported their requests for loans, lent them agricultural equipment, and provided his thresher to them for threshing their soybean and wheat. And he had mobilized some of them to go with him to the Bhojshala in 2006.

On one hand, by attaching them to the temple fund, Suraj Jat enabled a guaranteed source of low interest<sup>44</sup> credit for adivasis and lower castes. Everyone was loaned out at least some amount of money regardless of one's credit rating. But on the other hand, this has created another form of liability. Villagers knew that when they return the money each year, they get it back the very next day as a new loan. Thus, many of them simply

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<sup>44</sup> The 24 percent per annum interest rate is the norm in Ranipura and Dhar, with professional moneylenders charging from 36% to 60% per month. Most adivasis would not qualify for loans from government cooperative banks at interest rates of 12-15% per annum and this was the next best source of credit.



borrowed the amount owed to the temple fund from other sources for one day and returned it the next day at some mutually agreed upon rate of interest. Poor villagers, especially adivasis, thus, ended up being in debt without having any money to show for it. Moreover, with the opposition expressed by some upper castes regarding continued contributions of adivasis and lower castes, it is not clear at all whether all adivasis will obtain egalitarian access to the renovated temple once it is actually built. Financial involvement provides adivasis with a rationale for demanding equal access and potentially breaking through the hierarchies of caste. Yet at the same time, the temple fund has created new opportunities for domination of some of the poorest adivasis and lower castes within spirals of debt.

With the mobilization of dalits in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, where the dalit chief minister Mayawati has become a formidable national-level politician, and of lower castes in Bihar with several political groups challenging upper caste power, poor and marginalized groups in some regions have been able to raise a voice independently against upper caste discrimination. But the adivasis of Madhya Pradesh have not raised a collective voice against deprivation and upper caste discrimination in the state, with most adivasi leaders having been co-opted by upper caste leaders. Ramachandra Guha has surmised that since most adivasis do not live alongside upper castes in plains villages, they cannot influence vote bank politics in a large majority of constituencies the way dalits can and, consequently, political leaders have little to offer them in return (Guha 2007).

In the next section, I argue that one unintended consequence of the introduction of soyabean has given adivasis of the hills and the plains an avenue for asserting themselves

in relationships with upper castes even apart from formal political movements. I also suggest, however, that even though adivasi leaders have been co-opted by upper caste political groups, the space of democratic politics provides a crucial arena of struggle where adivasis can act on the possibility of making the state accountable to them by using the language of development as entitlement. One example is the successful pushing of the state to implement programs such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which, in combination with the changes brought about by the yellow revolution, has given more teeth to the agency of marginalized groups in Madhya Pradesh.

### **Creating an Economy of Haste**

In this section I describe an alternative arena of struggle where adivasis assert themselves and make demands for their rights and well-being upon upper caste farmers through circumstances created by the yellow revolution. State-promoted schemes and policies for the development of adivasi groups, which I discussed earlier in the chapter, do not recognize this arena as an important platform where adivasis wage an annual struggle fairly successfully for higher wages during the soyabean harvest.

What I call an ‘economy of haste’ is created every year at the soyabean harvest due to a combination of non-human actors such as technical characteristic of the soyabean crop, rain, characteristics of mechanized equipment, and the soil. These agents constrain the actions of farmers of all categories—big, small, rich, poor, low caste, adivasi, upper caste—giving a window of opportunity to labourers who are primarily adivasis to turn the tables. The labour of the adivasis of Malwa and Nimar is crucial to making the soyabean economy of Malwa work. Every year at the soyabean harvest thousands of adivasis travel from various parts of Nimar, Dhar, and Jhabua to cut the

soyabean in the fields of Malwa. Against a history of marginalization (Sundar 1997, Baviskar 1995) and the recent informalisation and casualisation of adivasi labour (Breman 1996, 2007: 416-420), Harriss-White 2003), the 'economy of haste' is an anomaly when adivasis all throughout Malwa and Nimar are able to assertively negotiate the terms of work and relationships with potential employers (farmers) compared to other times of the year.

Once soyabean matures, some varieties, more than others, exhibit the quality of shattering. As soon as the seeds in the pod mature, the leaves of the plant fall off and the stem dries up. If the crop is not cut within a few days, the pod becomes too dry and cracks open. This is known as shattering. The seeds inside it fall to the ground, and are almost impossible to recover, even by labourers or little children who spend time gleaning the field, i.e. picking up left over soyabean stalks with pods on them.<sup>45</sup> This necessitates immediate harvesting of soyabean as soon as it has matured, unlike other crops such as wheat.

The obvious option in such a situation would be using a harvester machine. In Malwa, the shift to large-scale soyabean cultivation took place in the late 1980s and 1990s when mechanized equipment such as tractors and harvesters were becoming widely available.<sup>46</sup> Such equipment came to be used despite the fragmented nature of

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<sup>45</sup> Little children, especially adivasi and lower caste, as young as 3-4 years old, look forward to gleaning soyabean from fields once they are cut. Their parents help them thresh the small bundles of soyabean stalks and with the money, the children go to Dhar with their parents and buy new clothes and firecrackers for the festival of Diwali which follows the harvest.

<sup>46</sup> In 1985, nearly 90% of farming was done by bullocks according to Vignesh Singh Rathod. He bought the second tractor in the village in 1995. The first was bought by Suraj Jat. Before that tractors from nearby villages were rented by villagers from Ranipura (Interview, May 4, 2006).

Indian farms and the large number of small and marginal farmers.<sup>47</sup> By the late 1990s, almost 100% of the farmland, in places like Ranipura and the rest of Malwa, was under soyabean cultivation, leaving very little for grassland. Farmers recalled that prior to mechanization, they were unable to farm large areas—bullocks were not enough to manage a large cultivated area. Use of tractors for sowing, weeding, and pesticide spraying helped increase cultivation. But harvesters faced major obstacles in their use.

According to Suresh Patel, owner of one himself, around 2000-2001 there were at least 9 harvesters in a 20-25 km region around Ranipura. By 2006, only six remained. The harvester boom was five years ago, he explained. Many machines had been purchased on financing from private companies. He bought his for Rs. 850,000 whereas today the cost has increased to Rs. 1.1 million. Initially they charged Rs. 1000 a hectare for cutting and threshing soyabean. Today the rate is Rs. 1400 a hectare—not much of an increase. The rates did not go up because of excessive competition amongst harvester owners in the region, according to Suresh Patel, and especially against machines travelling down the country from Punjab. “Some cut at 100 Rs a bigha [ $\frac{1}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> hectare], some at 80 Rs, and some just upon payment of the cost of diesel. Most were running under loss since 2001 when a drought hit the region. Since then harvesters stopped making money.” The consecutive years of drought reduced incomes and “many

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<sup>47</sup> Indian farm land is one of the most heterogeneous and physically divided spaces one could imagine. Very few of the large landowners—that 30% segment of farmers which owns and operates more than 2 hectares of land—have their entire land in one place. It is usually scattered across the village fields in three, maybe four, possibly many more small plots. For instance, the 21 hectares of Suraj Jat, the largest landowner in Ranipura village, comprised more than 10 smaller plots ranging from 1 to 5 hectares each. One of the main reasons for this is sub-division of land of equal quality amongst sons upon inheritance of land. If 10 hectares are in two different parts of the village, and half is good quality soil while the other half is poor, then both plots will be equally divided amongst the sons to ensure each gets some part of the good quality land along with the poor quality one [*pathrili zameen*]. Further, although farmers prefer to buy or take on lease plots of land next to the boundary of their own fields, many times this is not possible. Those farmers who cultivated land entirely in one area were able to complete their farming tasks much quicker compared to those who had to go in two or three different directions.

harvesters were sold off because people didn't want to run a business on loss."<sup>48</sup> But the competition was the least of the problems.

First, all mechanized equipment like tractors and harvesters cannot be used in wet fields.<sup>49</sup> If it rains just before or during harvest in October, and there is a fair chance of rain since this is usually the end of the monsoon, then the tyres of these machines will not be maneuverable in the wet soil until the sun can dry it out enough. There is a risk that the soyabean will shatter before the soil can completely dry out. In the first week of October 2006, the harvest in Ranipura was all being done by labourers by hand because it was too wet in the fields for harvesters to come in.

Second, the soyabean plant has to be completely dry else the sap in the stem sticks in the machine and spoils the soyabean. Moreover, "the entire field has to be at the same level of dryness else the harvester will get stuck," says Suraj Jat, the patel of Ranipura village and the largest farmer in Ranipura.<sup>50</sup> If you wait for the wet plants to dry, then the plants that have already dried may shatter.

Third, in some soyabean varieties such as JS-71-05 soyabean pods grow on the stem starting from less than 6 inches above the ground. Harvesters cut at least 1 or 1.5

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Suresh Patel from Tornod and Mohanlalji, Rangwasa, October 15, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Although tractors and harvesters became common in many villages, the fact that soyabean is a rainy season crop created a major hurdle in their use. In the soyabean season of 2006, farmers with tractors were not able to get them into the fields at all after July. Ever since the continuous rain started on 19<sup>th</sup> July, it didn't stop for a month and even after that it rained every few days not allowing the ground or the surrounding pathways to completely dry up. Farmers couldn't use the tractor to spray pesticide, nor could they use it for weeding (*dora chalanta*). They had to hire labourers for both these tasks. As all large farmers in the area around Ranipura were in the same situation, they ended up paying a higher rate to labourers, and thus, excluded the medium and small farmers from being able to hire labourers at all.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Suraj Jat, Ranipura, October 5, 2006. Soyabean can be manually cut even if it is still a little wet and all the leaves have not fallen off because it can be left in small heaps to dry in the field under the hot sun before being bundled up for threshing a few days later.

feet above the ground level so farmers planting short varieties stand to lose some percentage of the soybean.

Fourth, and the most commonly expressed problem, is the loss of fodder [*bhoosa*]. Currently available harvesters scatter the chopped remains of the soy plant all over the field (although in wheat there seems to have been innovation to collect the fodder in a separate compartment).<sup>51</sup> Those farmers who rear animals require fodder and prefer hand-cutting and stationary threshing of the crop. Usually they are medium and small farmers who keep animals for milk and farm operations. Their own family labour is enough to cultivate the land they own using bullocks. They save on tractor rent and are able to complete farming operations such as sowing, weeding, etc., according to their own schedule without having to wait around for the tractor to become available. For these operations they may employ some local labour on a daily basis as and when required. But at harvest, even these middling farmers require more than family labour to cut their soyabean in time to avoid shattering.

Large farmers with 20-40 hectares, too, will get at least 3-5 hectares cut by hand to obtain fodder for the animals they own.<sup>52</sup> Greater availability of tractors has decreased the need to keep many animals, especially bullocks, for the richest farmers and the poorest ones. The former use their own tractors for farming and unless they have a side business of milk or dairy products, such households have over time reduced the number of animals they own. The poorest farmers rent tractors for farming operations such as

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<sup>51</sup> The fodder scattered all over the field has to either be burned or ploughed in. If you burn it then the land becomes hard and the moisture in the soil at the end of the monsoons goes away. So one has to irrigate before sowing wheat and this increases the cost. Farmers for whom irrigation costs are very high burn the field only if there is less water available anyway and they won't be sowing this year according to a group of farmers in Ranipura (discussion at Tejilal Maru's shop, Ranipura, September 11, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> Discussion at Tejilal Maru's shop, Ranipura, September 11, 2006.

sowing because they cannot afford to feed bullocks all year long although they may keep a goat or a cow for milk. But the need for fodder has to be balanced with the need for expediting the harvest.

With the rapid expansion of soyabean cultivation to almost every cultivable piece of land in the villages of Malwa during the 1990s, and with the coming together of the weather, the technical characteristic of shattering of soyabean, and the difficulty of using mechanized equipment available, an atypical “economy of haste” came to be formed at the soyabean harvest for a very short period of time. The pressures of time and financial loss bearing upon farmers temporarily ruptured the traditional power structure of the farmer-labourer relationship. In 2006, the sowing of the entire village fields was completed within a space of 3-5 days so Gautam Singh Rathod said that farmers expected to face more labour problems at harvest since the soyabean would all mature at the same time. Village labour is never enough to complete the task<sup>53</sup> so for a few weeks during harvest, thousands of adivasi labourers come to cut the soyabean of Malwa from the farthest parts of Nimar and Jhabua, in southern and western Madhya Pradesh. Every bus is overloaded with passengers hanging onto the sides and sitting on the roof, dangerously tilting it to one side as it traverses the mountain passes on its way to the Malwa plateau.

These adivasis came in groups with entire families traveling together and children tagging along with their parents, leaving them out of school. Adivasi labourers from outside stay in a farmer’s field pitching plastic tents (made out of empty fertilizer bags

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<sup>53</sup> In Ranipura, not enough labour is available within the village. Out of 100 households, 32 households (about 75 men, women, and adult children) own some land but also hire themselves out as labour. Fifty-seven households hire labour at the time of harvest. As most labour in Ranipura is not landless, they need 3-4 days to finish their own harvest depending on how close to shattering is their own soyabean. Two households are completely landless and 9 households have leased out or mortgaged their entire land. They, too, hire themselves out as labour.

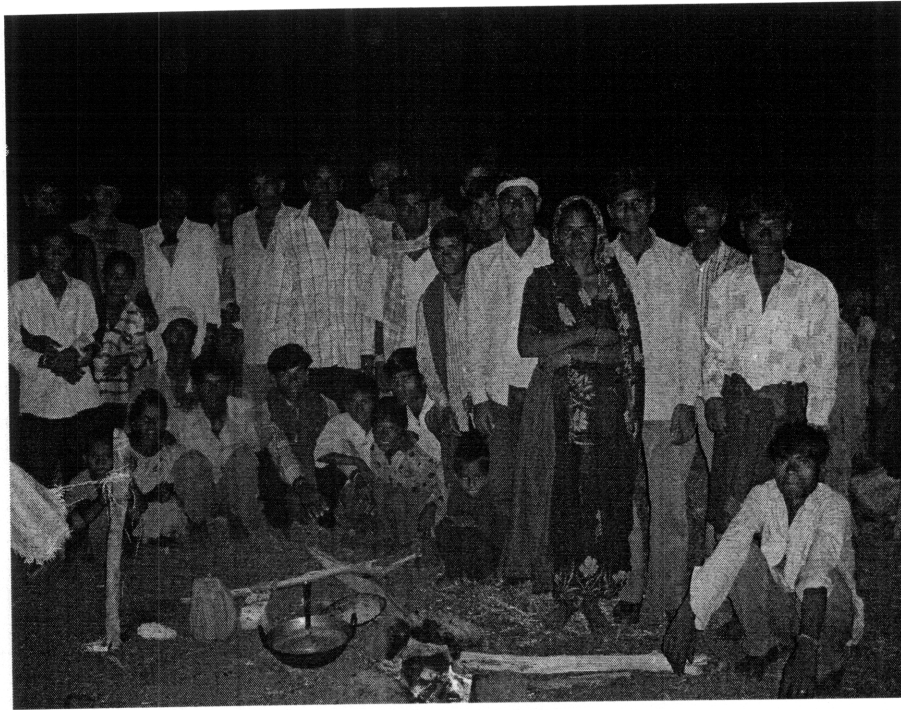
stitched together) or at times just sleep out in the open, the place being known as the '*dera*'. In 2006 October, the main *dera* in Ranipura hosted almost 100 people. The adivasis brought with them thin blankets, a sheet, a few clothes, and cooking utensils. The farmer who hired them was to provide firewood, water cans, and sometimes, wheat. The women would get up by 4 am, clean at the local pond or nearby well (if there was water in it), go to the toilet in the open behind some bushes, and come back to the *dera* and cook the morning and afternoon meal of corn bread and lentils [*makke ki roti* and *chowli* or *moong dal*], which they would have brought along with them. They would carry the bread in a cloth [*potli*] and leave for work by 7 am. At 8 they would start cutting the soyabean and would break between 1-2 pm for lunch.

By 6 pm in the evening they would come back to the *dera*, the women would light up the fires again and make bread [*rotis*] by hand for the night and cook vegetable [*sabzi*] if they had plucked any and got it back from the farmer's fields. They might also make a liquid chick pea flour [*besan*] soup. One lady would usually cook for 3 to 5 persons and one wood fire [*chulah*] would be shared by 2-3 families. Most of those who came were close relatives of each other. There was very rarely, if at all, any outsider in the group. The men would hang out at the *dera* or go to the village shops and buy *bidi* [local cigarettes] and tobacco. Young boys and girls would come to get puffed rice cakes [*pohe*] and sweetmeats [*jalebi*] when it was being made fresh at one shop in Ranipura. Women would purchase sugar, corn [*makka*], and rice for cooking. Each labourer would have a credit account at the shop which would be settled on the last day of accounts [*hisaab*] with the farmer on whose field he or she worked. During the last few days when all the cutting was over, the shops would also buy soyabean gleaned by the labourers from the



fields, at cheaper rates of 9 rupees a kg, when the rates in the Dhar *mandi* [market yard] were almost Rs. 13 a kg.

Young children, as small as one or two years old would be taken care of by an older child during the day—either at the *dera* or next to the field where the parents would be cutting. Most of them would be malnourished because their main diet was only maize. They would rarely have milk or fresh vegetables with vitamins and other nutrients in their diet. By 7 pm these kids would be sleeping half on a blanket and half fallen over on bare soil of the field. In the 2006 harvest, as I walked through the groups of people in the starry twilight, it was impossible to see where to step or to navigate a path between people. With no light to guide me except for the cooling embers from the cooking fires, I could have stepped on a sleeping child, or a hot cooking pan, a fire dying out, or a stone, or even food. Eating the evening meal, cleaning up and settling down would take almost till 10 pm when everyone finally fell asleep. Despite these poor living conditions, adivasis displayed an assertive spirit in negotiating terms and conditions of wages and work with farmers taking full advantage of the “economy of haste.”



A group of adivasi labourers from Bhediya and Kamta villages at the Ranipura adivasi *dera* in October 2006. Photo by Richa Kumar

### Opportunity for Group Negotiation by Labourers

In Ranipura, several such groups were working for different farmers during the harvest. Farmers prided themselves on maintaining long term relationships with such groups and in ensuring that the group returned each year during the harvest. Medium and large farmers went to negotiate with adivasi groups outside the village to come at harvest. They usually went around the festival of *Rakhi*,<sup>54</sup> in August, and gave an advance to the head of a group of 10-12 labourers. This was to book the person and his group for October. *Rakhi* is a time when money and resources are in short supply so people need

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<sup>54</sup> *Rakhi* is a festival where girls tie a band on their brother's wrist to symbolize the brother-sister bond and brothers pledge to help and protect their sisters. Brothers are expected to give gifts in cash and kind to their sisters. In villages, it is a time when brothers come to take their married sisters back to their natal village. This is one of the handful of socially sanctioned avenues for married women to go meet their own parents and family and for her family to give her personal spending money.

the advance money—the soyabean is yet to ripen and the wheat harvested in March has all been consumed.

Adivasi groups have bargaining power over upper caste farmers in these interactions. They can refuse to come in October when the farmer comes to call them and can ask for more money as advance. They can also ask for more money per day once they reach the harvest site, saying that another farmer has offered them 10 rupees more or that others in the village have been offered a higher rate. They may also not show up. Stories abound of labouring groups going to another farmer who picks them up in his trolley from the bus stop “enticing” them with more money. Or of labourer groups taking advances from more than one farmer and finally ending up at a third place altogether. In 2006 in Ranipura, 3-4 farmers had to run around at the last minute finding replacement labour for those who did not turn up. Farmers in the village, whose own harvesting was over, lent their labouring groups to others. Such exchanges were generally within families or with those with whom one had good personal relations. Labourers usually acquiesced to such requests because they earned extra money unless they were in a hurry to return to their village to cut their own soyabean.

Farmers are typically on the back foot in such interactions. They are worried about the shattering of their soyabean and losing a great deal of money. Ajit Singh Rathod, for instance, had given his 2.2 hectares on piece rate to an adivasi family in Ranipura itself. The head of the family was not in the village for a few days and the family delayed the cutting. Because of that Ajit Singh estimated that almost one quintal of soyabean had shattered in the field. He lamented that he lost 1500 Rs. worth of soyabean and he would have to pay 1500-2000 Rs. extra during the wheat season to

labourers for weeding the field and getting rid of all the unwanted soyabean that would grow.<sup>55</sup> For a large farmer, the costs can be much higher if there is any form of delay by labourers.

To avoid such situations, farmers go to great lengths to maintain good relationships with their labouring groups. Many pride themselves on calling the same group to harvest for them for years together. Suraj Jat ensures that his own contracted labourers reach Ranipura by sending his tractor trolley all the way to their village Semlipura, 30 kilometers away, in the mountainous jungle to pick them up and drop them off. At end of work he also gives them flour, lentils, animal dung fuel [*atta, dal, gobar ke kande*], ghee, money for liquor etc., and they go after freshening up at his well. The head of his labourer group, affectionately known as Pawna (son-in-law), was also sitting with us during this discussion. He told us that a farmer from Kachrod offered them Rs 125 a day per person to go with him. Pawna said “no, even if you give us 200 Rs. we won’t go with you.” Pawna had a long term relationship with Suraj Jat and it would take a great deal of effort to break their trust. He added, “Those who say Rs. 120 in the beginning don’t give that amount after the work is done. They give excuses saying that is not the going rate in my village.”<sup>56</sup>

Gajendra Singh, a farmer with 2 hectares of land, described to me the efforts required to maintain a good working relationship with labour. He only hires labourers from the village. “Why spend Rs. 200 going outside to get labourers,” he asks? At the field, “as labourers cut different rows of soyabean and someone falls behind, I cut with him to encourage him along. I give them tobacco, *beedi* (local cigarettes) at the field and

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Ajit Singh, Ranipura, October 17, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Suraj Jat and Pawna, Ranipura, October 5, 2006.

later 10- 20 rupees for liquor.” On the day of the interview, it was around 5 pm and all his fields had been cut. He told us that his wife has ordered the labourers not to leave and to collect the piles of soyabean and stack them in one place. The workers seemed restless. He salvaged the situation. “I put it [*dhalna*] in a nice way. I explained to them that if they leave now, the labourers on others’ fields will also stop working. So they should stay back and collect all the bundles until 6 pm.” If someone comes to the shop he runs in the village asking for something on loan, he adds, “I ask them to cut two bales of grass in return. They do not refuse.” He says he goes to labourers houses to placate them [*manaana*] (Oct 7, 2006). He doesn’t insist on quick repayment [*hisaab*] and behaves in a good manner [*accha vyavahaar*] with people. If they cannot pay now then they can pay after the next wheat season or if not then the next soyabean season. There is no rush of returning money.<sup>57</sup>

Farmers like Gautam Singh Rathod, who owns 2 hectares of land and leases in another hectare, usually give advance money to people in the village itself to book them for harvest. “Richer farmers get labour from outside because there are not enough numbers in the village and they need almost 20 people at a time. My nephew will get [labour] from outside but I have given advance to 20 people in the village itself.” Gautam Singh gives money in the rains, in summer and for weddings. He needs 40 labour days in total and if he gets 10 persons each day then his work is over in 4 days. On the first day

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<sup>57</sup> On November 29, 2006, I met Gajendra Singh in the mandi. This was the end of the soyabean season and the start of the sowing of wheat. He said “right now wheat is not available. It is 13 -14 Rs per kg. There is nothing extra with farmers to lend to others. During the wheat harvest season the price is not more than Rs. 7 per kg. With such high prices right now, a farmer doesn’t want to freely give it away. Some might give at an expensive rate of 1½ or 1¼ times in return, i.e. you borrow one quintal and you return 1.25 or 1.5 quintals. So adivasis are not getting enough wheat to eat. They are eating rice or poha (puffed rice). They have already eaten what they got earlier. So I am buying corn [*makka*] to stock in my shop to give to them. Later they will also help me.”

of his harvest in October, he needed 10 but finally hired all the 17 people who showed up. He showed me the different notebooks in which he recorded the advance (or rather, loans) given out to various people. From some he charged no interest, for others he did. Usually, he said, adivasis end up asking for much more money so at the end of the year they still owe money.<sup>58</sup> That way Gautam Singh does not have a labour problem. “I get the help I need and these people get money when they need it. But they may also commit to two people and then you are in trouble.”<sup>59</sup>

Suraj Jat recounted his own story from 2005. His old labour group leader had brought with him 15 new labourers. It turned out that these new people had also taken advance money from someone in another village, Betma. On the second day of work, Suraj Jat was in Dhar and his wife was supervising the cutting in the Tankawala field. The Betma farmer came and talked to the labourers and left. In the evening Suraj Jat was guarding [*rakhwali*] the Tankawala field and suddenly a phone call came that his labourers have tied their belongings [*potlis*] and are leaving. He rushed to the highway just in time to see them sitting in a tractor and tractor key ready in the ignition. He started pulling them off the trolley one by one and beating them. A crowd gathered and the farmer from Betma, who had come in the tractor, simply stood there. Finally they both worked out a compromise of hiring 7 labourers each.<sup>60</sup>

Farmers call their relatives or other older men in the village for mediation when such situations arise. For instance Sameer Singh Rathod was called on 6<sup>th</sup> October, in the

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<sup>58</sup> Gautam Singh (and many others in the village) also pays them at less than minimum wage – 30, 35, 40 Rs. a day. He says the labour inspector could catch him if the labourers complained or if I said anything.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Gautam Singh Rathod, Ranipura, August 2, 2006. The Ram temple priest estimated that Gautam Singh had almost 1 lakh rupees on interest floating around the village.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Suraj Jat, Ranipura, October 5, 2006.

middle of his own harvest, to sort out a labour problem on his nephew's farm in Nagda village. The labourers came from Sameer's sister's village, where she was married. Her husband also came to Nagda. The labourers had been paid Rs. 2000 in advance and the piece rate [*udhadaa*] had been fixed at Rs. 300 per bigha. But at harvest, the going rate in Nagda was Rs. 450, so the labourers stopped work. Similarly, Suraj Jat rushed on 8<sup>th</sup> October to Ghatabillod village when he got an urgent call from his relative. Instead of 15 labourers, 25 had reached and had finished the work in three days. Since they were free, they contracted with another farmer on a per bigha basis [*udhadaa*] for 80 bigha (20 hectares). But after cutting the field, the labourers were insisting that it was 95 bigha and they refused to collect and bring back all the soyabean piles from the field to one place for threshing. They said we will go back. Since the labourers had initially been called by Suraj's relative, he was involved in the mediation and called Suraj for help. "What a headache! (*Kya sir dardi hai!*)," Suraj complained to us, when he himself was in the middle of his own harvest. "There are so many labour problems." Every farmer is concerned with saving his own soyabean from shattering. Hence, they do not want to spend the little time they have in sorting out other people's problems, but due to family and kin relationships, they are forced to do so.

In general, agricultural harvests have historically provided farm labourers with the opportunity to exercise some bargaining power in relationships with potential employer-farmers. In American agriculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, several acts of collective resistance have been centered on this seasonal time. Most such actions, however, have been unsuccessful in the long run, as migrant workers have led an illegal existence and have been suppressed by the collusion of farmers and state officials

(Hahamovitch 1997). But the case of adivasi migrant workers in soyabean fields in Malwa is different.

First, there was no large scale labour migration taking place in Malwa prior to soyabean. Land was not extensively cultivated and crops like wheat and maize did not require large amounts of labour. Even today, wheat can be cut by hand over a period of a month or longer and family labour and village labour is adequate for the task. In contrast, in soyabean there is a spurt in demand for labour for a short period of time that has developed over the last 20 years as farming has extended to all possible cultivable land in the village. The characteristics of soyabean grown in India make it less amenable to being cut using the available harvester technology, which is suited for wheat.

Second, the soyabean harvest makes space for collective or group negotiation of wages and terms and conditions that affect an entire village (albeit not outside of it to any great extent). Adivasi labourers both from Ranipura and outside it cut farmers' fields in groups. The contract could be on piece rate (per bigha cut) or daily wages but it was always negotiated for a group of people. This was in contrast to all other farmer-labourer negotiations that were conducted between individual labourers (and sometimes their spouse and children) and farmers in a patron-client relationship. In articulation with the "economy of haste," this created a situation where the wage rate for each group decided upon in the end would be comparable to the "going rate in the village," which was the cumulative result of separate negotiations between each group and the farmer they were working for. This provided labourers with a village-level context and reference point for greater assertion and voice in such negotiations, despite being wound up in webs of debt relations with upper caste farmers. As some groups were able to increase the final rate, all



groups in the village would benefit, including those labourers belonging to Ranipura itself. This was in contrast to Jan Breman's findings in south Gujarat where migrant labourers were cheaper than village labour and were easier to hire and fire. In the competition with village labourers, both groups suffered downward pressure on wages and were unable to demand any allied support or benefits from their employers (Breman 2007: 52-63). The next section describes how the negotiations of labourers play out in practice.

#### **Adivasi Assertion: Khemraj Jat and the labour from Kamta**

The following episode from the 2006 harvest in Ranipura is a negotiation for payment between labourers and two farmers they worked for. At this point in time the harvest is already over and the farmer's soyabean is safely in his house. But the backdrop of the annual cycle of the "economy of haste" frames the actions of these labourers and gives them the ability to exercise power in these negotiations. As they invoke various reasons to make claims upon the farmers, they are successfully able to draw upon the force of group negotiations that have already taken place in the village.

My assistant and I had been interviewing the outside labourers from Kamta village who had come to work for Khemraj Jat, a large farmer in Ranipura. We went along with them to Khemrajji's house at the time of payment.<sup>61</sup> As we entered, his teenage son was doing final calculations [*hisaab*] of the number of days worked, the total amount due, and the advance to be subtracted. Both Khemrajji and Sitaramba were sitting on a cot, I was sitting on top of a bag of soyabean and the eight labourers were sitting on the floor and on soyabean bags around the room. Khemraj Jat and Sitaram Maru were

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<sup>61</sup> This incident took place on October 17, 2006.

known for their poor reputations in maintaining social relationships in the village. When the time for payment came, Khemrajji asked Sitaramba for money since they had shared the labourers. Sitaramba pulled out money from his pocket and said, “I only have Rs 300.” Khemrajji said, “What kind of a farmer are you? Don’t you know labour has to be paid?” Sitaramba replied, “I have given Rs 1000 as advance to Misru (the head of the group). His actual payment is Rs. 650. So let’s cancel that amount and then do the calculations [hisaab].”

At this point the labourers sitting there became concerned. One of them said, “You don’t attach our payment to Misru. You give our individual payment for the amount we have worked.” Others chimed in repeating this refrain. Khemraj Jat also supported the labourers’ claim and asked Sitaramba to shell out the money. “You do separate accounts with the labour. I will do my accounts separate with them.” Sitaramba said he didn’t have anymore money. At this Misru got angry. He said, “I will repay your money later. I don’t have any money right now even to go back to my village. I need more money from you now. I’ll do my accounts with you, where am I denying that [*mein kahan mana kar raha hoon*]?”

Sitaram retaliated: “Four times we went to your village to call you. Who will pay for that?” Misru shot back, “You aren’t doing any special favour to me by coming. You came because you had to get your own soyabean cut [*Mere mathe ehsaan thode kar rahe ho. Aapko soyabeej katwani hai isiliye aap aaye*].” They spoke in raised voices. Misru then turned to the room in general and said, “I have not seen a farmer like you. How will it work if you pay attention to little things like this [*Choti choti baton pe dhyan karoge to kaise chalega*]?”

At this point, Khemrajji opened his cards. He said to Sitaramba, “We have to pay the labour but even I don’t have more than Rs. 600. I couldn’t get it from the bank. It slipped from my mind. Today, Tuesday, the bank is closed. You have created a problem for me too.”

Hearing this Misru commented, “Girija Seth [Khemrajji’s younger brother] is very good compared to you. He paid 40 labourers in one shot and his labourers from Bhediya village came for the first time. They have no complaints. We’ve been telling you for 3 days that you keep payment ready, we have to leave. And today you are saying you don’t have any money.” In fact I learnt later that Girijalal paid 5 Rs. extra per day to each labourer at the rate of Rs. 85 and sent them back happy.

Finally Khemrajji said, “We have no money. We’ll pay those who need to leave urgently.” Jamuna bai immediately said, “Mine is urgent [*Mera urgent hai*]. I have to go.” So he paid her Rs. 560. The rest of the seven started shouting, “You pay us today; we have to go. We don’t have wheat or anything. You borrow money from the village and pay us.” Khemrajji suggested, “You come back and take it.” The labourers responded: “We have no money to go home. How will we come back? Why should we pay the transportation twice? Diwali is round the corner. We haven’t seen people like you. First time we have worked for someone who isn’t paying.” Khemrajji retaliated saying, “We won’t eat away your payment. We will give it but we don’t have money today.”

The labourers didn’t agree. This group was part of a larger group that had come to work for another farmer in the village. Khemrajji had requested for labourers because the group that was to come and work for him did not show up. So even though Misru had

been given advance money by Sitaramba and Khemrajji, these labourers did not receive any share of that. Given that traditionally farmers have more power in a negotiation between farmers and labourers, and more importantly, the harvest of Khemrajji was already over so there was no longer any “economy of haste,” he seemed to have the upper hand here. He could have very well insisted that he cannot pay the others and that they must come back. However, that did not happen. Instead, after some more wrangling, Khemrajji sent his sons to borrow money.

I was watching all this and scribbling notes all along. Sitaramba was smiling/smirking [*hanste jaa rahe the*] all throughout, Khemrajji was getting angry and the labourers were getting angry at Khemrajji. I, too, got exasperated with Khemrajji and couldn't help but ask him how come he hadn't made arrangements of money, especially when it wasn't a very large amount—just 8 labourers. My assistant got scared upon this interference of mine because Khemrajji has a reputation of being extremely unfriendly to everyone in the village. He doesn't get along with anyone, even his own brothers. Khemrajji replied very casually that he was busy with ploughing his fields for sowing wheat so he forgot.

Here is where the nature of group negotiation played a role. The eight labourers from Kamta insisted upon payment through several means. First they raised the question of their right to be paid for the work they had individually done. Next they reminded the farmer that he spent money on the tractor not for them but because he was caught up in the “economy of haste.” Then they appealed to the idea of reciprocity—if you don't treat us well you will find it hard to get help next year. Finally, they invoked the notion of the “going rate in the village” and drove the point home with a direct comparison with

Khemrajji's brother, the same brother with whom Khemrajji was not on talking terms. The labourers were able to push Khemrajji to accede to their demands for payment partly because there were other groups in the village who had successfully negotiated a higher rate and been paid that amount already. The village of Bhediya, where Girijalal's labourers hailed from, was only a few kilometers from Kamta and the groups knew members from each other's party very well.

After a hail of heated exchanges Khemrajji's wife, who was standing in the doorway to the room commented, "Everyone's payment will be made today only. With one call I can gather thousands of rupees in this village. Who do you think we are? Saying such terrible things to us all this while [*Sabka hisaab aaj hi ho jayega, ek awaaj pe main hajaroun rupye iikatha kar sakti hoon gaon mein. Kya samajhte aap humko, itni dere se bole ja rahe hain.*]." The labourers responded, "If you had the money you should have collected it before hand and given it to us. We would have taken it and gone without saying a word. There wouldn't have been any necessity to say all this. We will have to think about next year. How can one work under such circumstances?" Upon this Khemrajji said, "We will think about next year only next year. We also don't want labour which can't wait for money. You have come on behalf of Misru, you tell him if you have problems. Who are you to say things to us? We don't know you. We only know Misru."

Finally Khemrajji's son got Rs. 700 from his *mausi* (mother's sister, i.e., Suraj's mother) and Rs. 2000 from Suraj. Khemrajji started giving out the money and then his wife suddenly remembered, "They lost the water can also [*Bodali bhi inhone gayab kar dee*]." She reminded her husband to take that money from them—Rs. 40. Misru said, "We forgot it at the field, we didn't lose it. So what is this Rs. 40 for? It was a second

hand can, you can buy it for 20 rupees.” Khemrajji threatened, “No you have to give me Rs 40. You can’t leave otherwise.” Misru said, “I go to Dhar and spend Rs. 100 just like that in drinks, fun and frolic [*mauj masti*]. For Rs. 40 you have shown your pettiness [*dikha di apni aukat*]. For a 15-20 rupee can! We’ll give back your 40 rupees, don’t worry.” Misru got all the eight labourers to give 5 rupees each and he gave it to Khemrajji.

Meanwhile Khemrajji’s son was muttering, “We had fixed with you for Rs. 70 per day per person and now we are paying Rs. 80.” The labourers just got more agitated. “We can’t wait. With such an attitude there can be no basis for a future relationship [*aise vyavahaar mein aage jamega nahi*].” They took their payment and we all finally left. As we walked to another house to see another payment session, the labourers expressed their disdain that Sitaramba asked them to pay him for the tractor expenses for bringing them to Ranipura. “We told him,” they told my assistant and some other villagers, “If you brought us in a tractor you must have been in a hurry. We would have come on our own anyway. What kind of person asks for tractor expenses like that?!” Upon hearing this Akhil Jat, another distant cousin of Khemrajji, said, “I had told you before that you have got trapped at a butcher’s house [*kasai*].”

It is odd that Khemrajji bought his fertilizer already, got his ploughing done by a rented tractor, and did all other arrangements related to his farming except the payment for labour. The norm in Ranipura was that a farmer could hold off paying a tractor owner but not labour. From the richest villager Suraj Jat to the 2 hectare farmers like Dheeraj Singh, all were queuing up in the *mandi* to sell soyabean in the middle of October to

arrange payment for labourers. Else, how would the labourers come back next year? How would the soyabean be cut before it shattered and caused enormous financial loss?

Bharatji Jat, Khemrajji's older cousin and a farmer with 10 hectares of land, had gone to Bildari village to give advance to his labourers eight days prior to the harvest in 2006. Initially he had fixed the rate at Rs. 50 but the final "going rate" in the village was between 70 and 80 Rs. per person per day. Bharatji paid them at the rate of 80 Rs. "There is no discrimination [*bhed bhav*] with our labouring group. Whatever is the going rate in the village, we give that," he told me. The same 20 labourers had been coming to cut Bharatji's soyabean for the last 15 years and he prided himself immensely for maintaining such strong relationships. Ajit Singh Rathod paid the highest rate in 2006 to his labouring group from outside the village—Rs. 90 a day—because they went off to the highway village, Rangwasa, before completing the work and refused to come back unless he paid them more.

The articulation of the economy of haste with the opportunity for group negotiation gave adivasi labourers the power to demand their rightful wages and negotiate a higher price, even when they were embroiled in past debt relationships with these farmers (like Misru was). This was different from the past when adivasi labourers were engaged in individual relationships with upper caste farmers and were forced to accede to unequal terms and conditions. This articulation was not restricted to the labouring groups who came from outside. It resulted in benefits for labourers belonging to Ranipura also. Even though they were enmeshed in long term relations of debt with upper castes in the village, they, too, were able to demand higher wages in accordance with or even higher than the "going rate."

On the other hand, for adivasi farmers who lacked resources compared to wealthier upper caste farmers, the “economy of haste” created even more problems for them. For instance, adivasi farmers like Ajab Suvan, who farmed 2 hectares on his own and did not have a large extended family to form a sowing or harvesting network<sup>62</sup> (not unlike the threshing rings of the Midwest, cf. Rikoon 1988), needed labourers to help him out. He could not afford to hire labourers from outside but looked within the village itself. Since village labourers had already taken advance money from other well-to-do farmers in the village, the latter had first right on their labour. He was forced to give them a lot of flexibility, failing which no one would come and work for him. He told us a month after harvest in 2006 that he paid five labourers from the village at the rate of Rs. 100 a day to help him cut his 2 hectares. He told them, “I’ll pay you for the entire day’s work, you come, even if it is 1-2 hours late”.<sup>63</sup> In poorer quality soil [*halki zameen*] soyabean starts shattering even more quickly than in deep black soils. Most adivasi farmers like Ajab bhai did not have the means to replenish their top soil every year like the other Jat and Maru farmers in the village and hence face this problem even quicker than others.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, they get hold of labour only towards the end of the harvest. But the labourers who worked for them were even worse off than Ajab bhai—most of them farmed less than a bigha of land themselves and usually migrated out of the village to survive after the soyabean harvest. In comparison, Ajab bhai had a tubewell and was able to grow irrigated wheat.

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<sup>62</sup> About 25 members of the largest *adivasi* family in the village, the Makwanas, did their entire soyabean sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing altogether. Split into two groups, they would start from the fields of one family and move on depending on the maturity level of the soyabean. Each family paid every worker at the rate of Rs. 50 in 2006. Most of the transactions cancelled out because every member was also a worker. Those who had less land and worked more on others’ fields got wages in cash at the end.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Ajab Suvan, Ranipura, December 6, 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Mohan Jat, Ranipura, October 12, 2006.



The economy of haste also hurt labourers like Jagatji Makwana and his wife who worked for upper caste farmers all year long as *halis* and did not have the option of open negotiation of wages. They were only able to go and cut their 1/4<sup>th</sup> hectare of soyabean when the entire harvest was already over. Premabai and her husband were yearly labourers [*hali*] at a backward caste Jat household and had to finish the Jat's work before commencing their own. I found her alone on her field next to the pond. The soyabean had long dried and the stalks were all deep yellow, their height was short and the pods were few and far between. Much of the soyabean had already shattered and had fallen on the ground, not available for picking any more. I found the situation to be helpless and pathetic—whatever efforts Jagatji and his wife had been able to put in the field, much of that was staring back at us from the folds of the soil. But what surprised me was the exuberance, brightness of Prema bai. As she shuffled along on her haunches cutting away, she chatted with me nonchalantly. I felt more pained by her loss but she didn't sound like a woman of despair. She explained to me that because the demand for labour was over, she could now get two women from the village to work for her for Rs. 50 a day. She needed help because working all alone would result in even greater percentage of soyabean being shattered.<sup>65</sup>

### **Beyond the Harvest**

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the economy of haste has been an annual feature of the Malwa landscape. However, the assertion of adivasis articulated during an “economy of haste” has been limited only to that one month period during the year. After the harvest, adivasi labourers went back to their own villages or moved on to other urban

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Prema bai, Ranipura, October 18, 2006.

sites for construction work. Villagers in Ranipura started looking for wage labour in the village and increasingly many of them migrated to places like Pithampur and Gujarat. Every year new bonds of solidarity and group assertion would form and then dissipate with the end of the harvest.

From Diwali, in October, right after cutting soyabean in the fields of Malwa and in their own fields in the Nimar hills, the adivasi labourers from outside would go and work in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Pithampur until the rains. I presumed they came back to their village to plant soyabean but the adivasis who came to cut the soyabean at Ranipura said that they had very little land. So it was not worth coming back for the farming. They came back because they have nowhere to take shelter in the rains—there was no house to live in at Pithampur—they lived in makeshift tents/sheds all year round moving from one site of work to another. They worked as manual labour in making houses where they carried bricks, water, and mixed cement. They sold wood from the nearby forests, made tunnels for phone lines (*phone ki nali*), installed big water pipes, helped in factory construction, and even worked as helpers to masons (*judai ka kaam*). Their ration cards could be used to purchase subsidized foodgrains, kerosene and sugar only in their village in the mountains and not in Pithampur, so they were forced to buy expensive food and fuel from the town. One family I spoke to was working at constructing a plastic factory there in 2006. For the last 10-12 years they had been coming to Malwa to cut soyabean and for nearly 15 years they had also been going to Pithampur every year.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Juvan Singh and family from Bhediya village, Ranipura *dera*, October 2006.

At the end of the harvest, adivasis in Ranipura headed over in the opposite direction, towards Gujarat. In the last five years or so, some of them discovered a new site of work. According to Umang, one of the earliest migrants, “there is no [continuous] daily employment available in Ranipura that is why we need to go to Gujarat.” They farmed their 1-2 bighas of land during the soyabean season and then took off in November or December to return only during the wedding season in April. At least 5-6 families had consistently been going to Gujarat in the last few years. There, they made and sold coal by a piece rate of Rs. 150 for 40 kg. They cut wood from the nearby forest of *babool* trees, bundled it together, covered it with jute bags and then with mud, made a makeshift *bhatti*. This would burn and after 4-5 days they would pour water over it and open it to retrieve the coal. The total process of 5-6 days yielded 25 sacks of coal which they sold to the two *seths* [businessmen], Ameen and Aalaana.<sup>67</sup>

Raju Makwana, another adivasi villager, had never been that far away from Ranipura but he told me in one of our conversations, “I am thinking of going to Gujarat with Kamal [the first person who went to Gujarat and organized the travel of everyone else in Ranipura]. You get continuous unskilled work [*salang mazdoori*] there. You get Rs. 100 everyday in Gujarat compared to Dhar where you get only 50-60 Rs a day.” Increasingly more and more tribal labourer-farmers are contemplating going to Gujarat. In fact, in late 2007, one of the poorest upper caste Rajput families also migrated to Gujarat to work in the salt mines expecting to earn between 100-150 rupees a day. This was Rajay Singhji who had only 2 bigha of land left and was mired in debt of more than one lakh rupees. Rajay Singhji’s only son ran away from home many years ago and a lot

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Nagar Singh and Umang, March 7, 2007, Both have gone there several times.

of money was spent trying to find him. He also had to pay a dowry for his daughter's wedding as well as for the ceremonies at his mother's funeral. The family lived at the mercy of Rajay Singhji's wife's family but finally decided to come back to Ranipura in 2007. They spent the soyabean season working on their field but left for Gujarat in October.<sup>68</sup> Amita Baviskar has described the horrifying working conditions of these migrant labourers from Jhabua and Dhar district, many of whom have contracted silicosis and died after working in stone crushing units in Gujarat (Baviskar 2008).

### **The Role of the Democratic State: Accountability and Representation**

In the earlier part of this chapter, I have described the failure of state programs to help adivasis in Madhya Pradesh, I would like to turn now to another aspect of the state in India, which is infrequently referred to during discussions of development—that of electoral politics and democratic accountability. The processes of electoral democracy have taken root very strongly in India unlike many other countries of the world. Much of the critical literature on development, especially that written by anthropologists, stems from experiences in Africa where the state is weak, development programs are mostly organized and funded by international donor agencies, and the institutions of democratic politics are absent in many places. As a few political scientists in India have recently suggested (Chatterjee 2004, Corbridge 2007), I too, would like to argue that democratic politics is an important arena of struggle where marginalized groups like adivasis can make claims upon the state to shift resources to them, and they can hold the state

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<sup>68</sup> The biggest casualty of such temporary migration is the education of the children in primary and middle school who are able to attend school only for three months a year. So where on the one hand the state is pushing for 100% enrolment in primary education, on the other hand it is not able to provide any options for such children. Many of them leave in October and come back in March, when examinations are about to begin. Some even take the exams and then end up sitting in the same class next year, but only for three months.

accountable to them for their well-being. The following section describes how one such instance has played out in Madhya Pradesh in combination with the “economy of haste” and supported adivasi assertion of their rights in a significant manner.

In December 2006, a new government scheme to provide employment to labourers during periods of low availability of wage labour brought new dynamics into the relationship between farmers and labourers in Ranipura. The central (federal) government in Delhi which had been formed by a coalition of parties under the Congress party promulgated the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in 2005, which provided guaranteed employment to all villagers for at least 100 days in the year in their own village. The scheme was a result of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which was passed by the parliament in response to struggles by non-governmental organisations, some in Madhya Pradesh, which argued for creating government programs to support a large group of people in villages who did not have a significant source of income from farming nor found year-round employment opportunities in agriculture (Shah 2005a, Shah 2008b).<sup>69</sup> This was especially true of a dryland region like western Madhya Pradesh. The scheme was also the flagship program of the Congress party which viewed lower castes and adivasis as a major rural vote bank in country as opposed to the upper caste and trader-businessman vote bank of the BJP.

In December 2006, the NREGS was implemented in Dhar district and almost every village panchayat in Jhumki block was given money by the central government to employ villagers to build local infrastructure. The cornerstone of the program was an

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<sup>69</sup> See [http://www.righttofoodindia.org/rtowork/ega\\_intro.html](http://www.righttofoodindia.org/rtowork/ega_intro.html) for a comprehensive compendium of articles, critiques, and data submitted to the Parliament on the NREG Bill and information on the implementation of the NREG Act and the NREG Scheme from 2004 to the present.

emphasis on “right to work”—if a villager was not given 100 days of work in a year, he or she would be eligible for unemployment compensation. Villagers could go and demand employment from their *panchayat sarpanch* and secretary. Every household was eligible to work, both upper and lower caste, and each household would get one job card with the photographs of all members eligible to work on it.<sup>70</sup> The exercise saw the villagers of Ranipura build a stone road half way to the main highway as well as a cemented road in the tribal section of the village [*tapra*] and in front of the school. It also ensured that villagers received a wage equivalent to the minimum daily wage guaranteed by the government—Rs. 67 per day. Almost 90-100 villagers, nearly all adivasis, participated in the program during the four months from January to April 2007. During the summer of May and June no work was undertaken.

With the coming of the rains in July when the soyabean season began, the daily rates for weeding suddenly shot up from 35-40 Rs. the year before to 50 or 60 Rs., which was still below the minimum wage of Rs. 67 per day. At harvest in October, farmers paid wages of 120 Rs. per day when in 2006 the maximum rate was Rs. 80 (one farmer paid Rs. 90). The explanation given to me by upper caste farmers was that the adivasi labourers, both in the village and in other outside villages, had made enough money in the first half of the year through NREGS work. Usually, the rainy season is the most difficult time of the year because the stock of wheat obtained in March (through one’s own field and through payment for one’s labour) is over and the harvest of soyabean is still three months away. Adivasi villagers are always on the lookout for some work at this

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Panchayat Secretary of Rangwasa village, November 5, 2006. There were several anomalies in the villagers’ understanding of what they were to get under the NREGS and what the *panchayat* secretary told me in an interview with him. The villagers were told they would get 90 days of work and were paid only 60 rupees a day, as opposed to 63 rupees, which was the original minim wage. Later on the minimum wage was raised to 67 rupees.

time. In 2007, according to upper caste farmers, the only way they could be coaxed to work in the rains was through a rise in wages. At harvest, upper caste farmers further complained that adivasi labourers played one farmer against the other and in the competition for scarce labour, obtained a very high wage rate. According to the Suraj Jat the employment provided by the state was expected to augment the opportunities available for wage employment in agriculture. Instead, it created a scarcity of labour in the main agricultural season.<sup>71</sup> From the point of view of adivasi labourers in Malwa, this program of the state helped extend their power of assertion in relationships with farmers to other times of the year, which in the past, was limited to the soyabean harvest. This kind of impact on wages was not restricted to Ranipura or to Dhar alone. There was a similar response from farmers in several states in the country (Kang 2008).<sup>72</sup>

The main difference between the NREGS and state programs I described earlier in the chapter was the arena on which they were designed and implemented. State programs such as handouts to adivasis were formulated by upper caste officials in the agricultural department bureaucracy in Madhya Pradesh without any participation or inputs from adivasis themselves. In contrast, the NREGS was formulated in the legislative parliament in Delhi with grassroots organisations, many of them representing adivasis from Madhya Pradesh, putting pressure on their respective Members of Parliament to make legislation supporting their constituents in rural areas. The important distinction here is that the NREGS is a result of a *right* to employment that is guaranteed under the Indian constitution. This gives labourers the legal ability to make the government enforce this right, and thus, makes the government accountable to them for its actions.

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<sup>71</sup> October 18, 2007, Suraj Jat's field.

<sup>72</sup> See Sukumar (2008) specifically for Andhra Pradesh and Khera (2008) for analysis of the impact in Badwani district in Madhya Pradesh.

The success of the NREGS reflects the successful mobilization of voices of the poor which “echoed during the Rozgar Adhikar Yatra that criss-crossed ten States in May-June 2005,” writes Mihir Shah, an academic and grassroots activist working in the adivasi areas of western Madhya Pradesh for the last 20 years through his organisation Samaj Pragati Sahyog (Shah 2005a). The cross-party coalition of political representatives who were responsible for drafting the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, were responding to political demands for creating a “right to employment” for all rural inhabitants, regardless of income levels. In Malwa, in combination with the economy of haste at the soyabean harvest, this created unprecedented opportunities for adivasi labourers to assertively and successfully demand higher wages from farmer-employers.

### **Conclusion**

Those who “do development,” whether it is aid agencies, NGOs, the World Bank, or development experts, criticize politics as an interference in technical solutions to the problems of poverty and hunger and seek to make their interventions as “apolitical” or “depoliticized” as possible. Despite the shift towards participatory development in the 1990s, project sponsors and funding agencies ultimately determine what are legitimate needs and what projects should be implemented (Walley 2004). Only those needs of the poor that are determined to be “apolitical” are considered legitimate claims for being funded through development projects. Even though participatory projects emerged from political struggles by feminist and leftist groups, concepts like empowerment were quickly co-opted by the discourse of development promulgated by state and neoliberal actors (Sharma 2008, Paley 2001a). In contrast, Stuart Corbridge argues that the fetishization of concepts like good governance, civil society, participatory development



and the like by development studies and the practitioners of development “demeans the efforts and achievements” of people through political claims made upon the state (2007: 193).

For the marginalized adivasis of Ranipura, change has not come through apolitical development projects of the state that have sought to give them handouts of things they need. Rather, change has been a result of efforts made by marginalized groups and their grassroots organisations that has influenced the shape of legislation through active participation in democratic politics. Although it has been said in the past, it is worth repeating once more that “the state” is not a monolithic entity and that different levels of government act in response to different political groups (Gupta 1995). Just like development experts and development organisations, the permanent bureaucracy of appointed government officials in India is not directly accountable to the people for their actions. They respond to pressures of accountability that stem from their donors or their seniors in the bureaucratic system. In contrast, representatives elected to office through the mechanisms of democratic politics are also a facet of “the state” and inhabit a position which makes them directly accountable to the constituents who elected them. In the strong and resilient framework of India’s democracy, if these representatives do not satisfy the needs and demands of their constituents, they are booted out of power.

Different political groups and parties also respond to different social groups in society. The NREGA was the flagship program of the Congress party which got elected to power at the national level in 2004 on the basis of an election plank that promised extensive support to rural areas. The Congress party was also trying to woo adivasis and dalits away from the BJP, the two main groups that would benefit the most from such a

scheme. In the multiparty framework of Indian democracy, there is political space for a wide range of interests to be articulated, whether it is through tribal political parties in Madhya Pradesh or through a nationalist Hindu party like the BJP.

In thinking about the state, it is useful to consider Partha Chatterjee's argument about political society (2004, 2008a). He argues that a majority of rural and urban Indians make claims upon the state as part of larger groups such as adivasis, dalits, slum dwellers, etc., within the space of political society, rather than as individuals participating in processes of civil society, whose will is supposed to be reflected in the governance of the state. He suggests that the constituents of political society use the language of rights (and I add, of development as an entitlement) to mobilize the state to act in their interests. The state, however, responds to these actions not as it would respond to rights-bearing citizens in civil society. Rather, it considers them to be claims that can potentially be fulfilled based on political expediency. According to Chatterjee, the inhabitants of political society live in a space of illegality and marginality, which denies them the possibility of being treated as rightful, rights-bearing citizens whose demands are to be taken seriously as shortcomings of the state. However, successful mobilization and implementation of Acts like the NREGA provide a space for marginalized groups to use the language of rights to make demands upon the state and at the same time, make the state respond to them through legal mechanisms of redress, rather than through the expediency of political society.

Nevertheless, I agree with Chatterjee when he argues that, "Policy and politics mutually constitute each other on the field of mass democracy" (2008b). In other words, policies for bringing about change are the result of political action. At the same time,

political action stems from the failure or success of policies that help or hurt various groups of people. The depoliticised language of development fails to recognize this fundamental dynamic that characterizes the relationship between the state and society in India. It does not see this as a vital arena of struggle for marginalized groups to make claims upon the state in the name of development.

When development projects refuse to engage with political questions they relegate themselves to a marginal space in rural society and set themselves up for failure. But more importantly, their dismissal of politics blinds them to the vibrant possibilities of change that can arise from an engagement with politics, which according to Chatterjee is the only means for change for a majority of the poor in India. These possibilities are premised upon the democratic process which has made a differentiated state accountable to those it represents in democratic politics. The refusal of development practitioners and agencies to engage in political action and the constant depoliticization of their interventions sets them up for failure because they do not engage with the structures of domination in society. In efforts to sanitize politics and depoliticize development, agendas of participation and good governance end up becoming irrelevant to the needs of the people they are supposed to help.

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## Chapter Four

### Lines of Exclusion and Languages of Empowerment

The yellow revolution has mapped itself onto the “rural” along the lines of exclusion that frame rural society. This chapter is an attempt to delineate the lives of people who remain invisible in academic and popular discussions of the “rural” that focus only on farmers and labourers. There is a growing number of farming families in Malwa and other parts of India<sup>1</sup> who will not be able to survive on agricultural production alone in the near future, despite growing cash crops like soyabean. Semi-educated young men from these families do not see a future in farming, yet are unable to participate in the urban industrial economy. There is also that fifty percent of the rural population—women—who are subsumed within the larger categories of “farmers” or “labourers” and whose exclusion from the monetary benefits of the yellow revolution are hidden behind the glitzy motorbikes and tractors seen in every village in Malwa. Thus, instead of transforming these people’s lives, development projects such as the yellow revolution have reproduced their subordinate positions within society.

Development projects pursued by international organisations as well as state agencies may target their benefits specifically towards marginalized groups and even help them overcome some forms of social exclusion that people may find themselves in. But they do not lend themselves to critiquing the nature of the lines of exclusion that circumscribe people’s lives, nor provide any avenues to engage in questioning, and perhaps, erasing those lines themselves. Even projects of political mobilization, while

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<sup>1</sup> In parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the demographic shift has already happened and more people are landless than ever before in rural areas. In Madhya Pradesh, the trend is becoming more serious and will result in greater landlessness in the coming decade.

enabling marginalized groups to make demands upon the state using the language of development as entitlement, often co-opt women into larger categories based on class or caste and do not focus on gender-specific exclusions arising locally.

This research argues that development need not be the only language to think about transformation in society or the only category for people to interpret and make sense of their experiences. I suggest that cultural projects can provide equally powerful languages of empowerment that enable marginalized groups to fundamentally question the lines of exclusion framing their lives and to exercise agency and bring about change. In Malwa, such a project has taken the form of a religious revivalist movement known as *Swadhyay* which invokes an egalitarian ethic that rejects caste and patriarchy. *Swadhyay* has provided some women and adivasis in Ranipura with culturally constructed subject positions where they can exercise agency and feel empowered in ways that are often not recognized in discussions of development. During my fieldwork, it became clear that the framework of *Swadhyay* was more important to people in thinking about social transformation than the language of development. Hence, this research takes the unusual step of considering development alongside a religious movement.

In the language of development, those who are the “targets” of development, or receive aid, are always positioned as being in need—as backward, poor, and lacking. The discourse of *Swadhyay* on the other hand, does not position women or lower castes as lacking or as a subaltern. Rather, it helps them participate in everyday acts of working, eating and learning, as actors working alongside other individuals in society in equal, reciprocal relationships. It has provided excluded groups an opportunity to make attempts at being rightful agents in world which does not wish to acknowledge their existence. Such cultural projects are typically seen as outside the frame of development. But I argue

that they can be equally powerful metaphors to speak to the deeper aspirations of people who are framed along the lines of exclusion in rural society. Hence, they should be considered as important alternative arenas of struggle where people engage in projects to bring about social transformation.

Further, this research cautions against the tendency to create a monolithic identity of all Hindu religious expression as Hindutva or Hindu fundamentalism. I, too, subscribed to such a tendency when I was questioned by a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) volunteer in Ranipura whether I was a Christian missionary with the aim of religious conversion, just when I had begun my fieldwork. Initially, I was suspicious of *Swadhyay* and of the desire of some women and adivasis to participate in it. But over time, I realized that I needed to take seriously the reasons why this movement appealed to them rather than just dismissing it as a “cultural” phenomenon—one that could either be denigrated as traditional or glorified as upholding cultural values.

The egalitarian ethic of *Swadhyay* draws from Hindu religious texts but it is the anti-thesis of the singular vision of Hinduism espoused by the political proponents of Hindutva. Although the actions of upper caste men who participate in *Swadhyay* reflect the contradictions of caste pride and patriarchal values grinding against an egalitarian ethic, the movement offers unprecedented opportunities for the excluded to fundamentally challenge their position in society. I suggest that we pay attention to such alternative arenas of struggle which have captured the imagination of people in Malwa in a way that the language and framework of development has not, and to open our minds to other possibilities of social transformation.

### **Fragmentation of Land: Displacing the Youth from Agriculture**

In spite of the yellow revolution in Malwa, families from upper and lower (scheduled) caste groups face the threat of land fragmentation and their agrarian viability is called into question by a hybrid set of dynamics—social and demographic pressures working alongside economic pressures of farming. The young men from these families comprise a semi-educated rural proletariat, which is struggling to find its foothold in an agrarian economy that is steadily foreclosing on them. They cannot see a future as farmers, yet they cannot bring themselves to do manual work expected of labourers.

Marxist-inspired historians and economists have argued that after liberalization in 1991, the primary reason for the displacement of “peasants” from the means of production has been the growing power of corporate capital in conjunction with state power (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2008). This research suggests there are more complex dynamics in play. The introduction of soyabean agriculture and with soyabean processing companies being fundamental to sustaining the cultivation of the crop, the introduction of corporate capital into agriculture in western Madhya Pradesh should be predated to the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Chatterjee writes that it is “pressures of market cultivation that make small peasant cultivation unviable over time because it is unable to increase productivity.” While the predatory role of corporate capital may be in play in other parts of the country, especially in zones of land acquisition such as parts of West Bengal, the situation in Malwa is different. As discussed in earlier chapters, soyabean cultivation, in fact, provides an opportunity for poorest producers to gain something from the land—even the poorest of farmers stay in the village to grow soyabean before migrating elsewhere for

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<sup>2</sup> If we go back to the opium economy of the colonial period then the role of mercantile capital must also be recognized (Farooqui 1998).



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wage labour—it helps them stay afloat. It is a market crop that, ironically, allows farmers to stay on the land and be able to subsist (Mitchell 2002).

Instead it is quirks of demography that have played a primary role in fragmentation and subsequent shrinking of the sustenance possibilities from the land, in ordinary, average, everyday villages like Ranipura. Inter-generational farm fragmentation has become a serious issue for large number of households (Gupta 2005). Unlike other parts of India like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, in western Madhya Pradesh the situation hasn't reached crisis point yet. But in the next generation, almost 80% of Ranipura will have to find something else to do besides farming. The constancy of high birth rates and decline in infant mortality over the last 40 years has brought Ranipura to the point of maximum surviving population between the ages of 15-45. On the demographic transition curve, Ranipura is slowly entering a phase of lower birth rates, although the quirks of demography arise when families have more number of boys or girls. In a patrilineal society where boys are deemed vital to the survival of the family name and patrimony, women who give birth to only to girls are expected to reproduce until a male heir is produced. Despite laws to the contrary, land is still inherited only by male children (with sisters signing off their legal shares to their brothers) and the more number of boys, the greater number of parcels of the land.



A satellite image of Ranipura village showing the sub-divided plots of farm land. The residential area is marked with a rectangle and the fields within the village boundaries are surrounding it.

Source: Wikimapia, accessed December 24, 2008.

The upper caste Rajputs have historically been amongst the most powerful in Ranipura village. Forty years ago, Hare Singh Rathod's family was one of three main Rajput descendents in Ranipura who had migrated from Rajasthan more than 150 years ago. He owned 130 bigha (out of about 1000) but most of it was uncultivated grassland. About thirty years ago Hare Singh's son killed his own cousin in the village in an "honour fight." Although this saved their pride [*izzat*], it also forced Hare Singh to sell 20-25 bigha of land for court fees, worsening their financial position and causing interruptions in the education of some of his grandchildren. Today his grandchildren comprise ten brothers,<sup>3</sup> each owning not more than 8-10 bigha (2 to 2.5 hectares) of land, and a total of 85 bigha or 21 hectares. These brothers comprise the typical "small farmer"

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<sup>3</sup> They have two sisters who are married and living in other villages in Malwa.

in the Indian context—running *somewhat* economically viable farms because they are supported by a little outside income. Some brothers support themselves through permanent government jobs (obtained before the implementation of reservations for lower castes), and a side business of selling milk and milk products. Others manage with the farm land they own and by leasing in land during the *rabi* (winter) crop to grow more wheat and the newly profitable “dollar *chana*.”<sup>4</sup> One brother is in the health department, another brother and two nephews are government school teachers, and a third brother is in the irrigation department while his wife is a government crèche [*anganwadi*] worker.

Each of the ten brothers has one or two sons for whom survival on one hectare of land in the future is next to impossible. The next generation of Rajputs consists of 17 boys and 12 girls. The 17 boys would expect to inherit 5 bigha or 1.25 hectares each on average of land. These 17 young men (and boys) would not be able to maintain the same standard of living as their parents by relying on the farm alone.

The adivasi (tribal) Makwana family settled down in Ranipura almost at the same time as the Rajputs. Their ancestor Bhurji owned about 50 bigha some 50 years ago and did not have any sons. His only son-in-law Punjaji came and settled in Ranipura and had seven children. The seven brothers also purchased land individually and today each owns about 8-14 bigha (2-3 hectares). They were the only adivasi family apart from the village chowkidar [guard] who owned land prior to the redistribution initiated by the government. The seven sons of Punjaji have 25 sons in turn<sup>5</sup> and this new generation farms 88 bigha of land. Each of these individual families owns on average 3.5 bigha of

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<sup>4</sup> “Dollar *chana*” is a type of gram or chick pea whose seed was imported by farmers themselves, seemingly from Mexico. It is called dollar (and a larger variety is called ‘double dollar’) because it was sourced from somewhere in America. It is suspiciously similar to garbanzo beans in size, colour and taste and was not grown in India earlier. It is not consumed domestically but is entirely an export crop. It is not approved as a crop by the Indian government’s Ministry of Agriculture.

<sup>5</sup> The 25 brothers have 23 sisters who are all married outside the village.

land which is less than one hectare. Four out of the 25 sons obtained a government job owing to the reservations for scheduled tribes implemented by the MP government.<sup>6</sup> One is a forest officer, one is a school teacher, one is a panchayat secretary, and one is a multipurpose health worker. Their jobs are outside Ranipura and none of them stay in the village. The job is their main source of their income and they all lease out their land to their cousins.

The Jats, on the other hand, are descendants of two brothers Issaji and Ghisaji. They had 10 grandsons too, and the following generation has 14 boys. The Jats farm 360 bigha of village land and each of these 14 boys would expect to get about 25 bigha or 6 hectares of land. Both Suraj Jat and his cousin Girijalal are only sons with 7 sisters each. Their cousin Bharatba has four daughters and no sons. His younger brother Mohan Jat has one son who will inherit the entire land of his father and uncle.

A few Rajput and adivasi families have lost their land in the past due to debt and mortgage—the reasons for debt have varied from court cases and lawyer's fees, excessive alcoholism, medical treatment, weddings, dowry, and funerals among others. Even though the Jats and Marus owned a greater amount of land to begin with, demographically they have less number of men in the current generation who are dividing up the land. Hence, they can afford to live off the land alone for the next generation at least. From the following table it is clear that 75% of the households in Ranipura will have to supplement their income from farming in the near future.

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<sup>6</sup> Two women of the Makwana family also have government jobs—one sister is an anganwadi worker while another is an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM).

Households by caste	No. of bigha	% of village land	No. of households	No. of men inheriting land	Avg land parcel per male member	In hectares
Makwanas	88	9	23	25	3.5 bigha	0.87
Adivasis	99	10	30	30	3.3 bigha	0.82
Rathods	201	19	21	38	5.2 bigha	1.3
Marus	266	27	12	11	24 bigha	6
Jats	361	36	12	14	26 bigha	6.5

Table 1: Land distribution in Ranipura village by caste showing the average land size farmed by the current generation. The data is an approximation based on my own surveys in the village. It does not correspond to the data in the Ranipura village land records. It includes some portions of land listed under the nearby Rangwasa village and Gulwa village records as many Ranipura farmers own land there. The average landholding for adivasi families hides large discrepancies in ownership. The modal ownership in the Makwana households was 2 bigha.

### Planning for their Future: Rajputs and Makwanas

Young men in Ranipura have responded to these constraints of fragmented landholdings in different ways. Their situation is circumscribed by their position in the caste hierarchy and this mediates the kinds of avenues for employment they find available and acceptable to them and their families. The following section describes the circumstances a few young men from the Rajput and Makwana families of Ranipura find themselves in and the aspirations they have for their future.

Sharad, a young Rajput in his early twenties was completing his Bachelors degree in Commerce from Dhar in 2006 while his younger brother, who was less interested in studies, was apprenticing at a tailor's shop. Their father, Gajendra Singh owns 8 bigha of land. As a young boy Gajendra Singh was electrocuted from a high voltage wire at the fields and was unable to do any major physical activity for several years. His father left him in Dhar to work as a house servant and baby sitter for P.B. Modi, the largest businessman/trader in the town. Gajendra Singh never had the opportunity to study or apply for government jobs like his siblings. He opened a sundry [*kirana*] shop in the

village in 2007 to provide an alternative source of income for his sons. He said that 4 bigha (one hectare) is not enough for each son to take care of an entire family. He does not plan to give his daughter any share in the land because he has already given her a dowry. He said, “My financial setting was disturbed [*Meri setting bigad gayi thi*] after marrying off my daughter. I had to take loans to give her dowry. It took me four years to repay most of that debt. Now I have taken a new loan from the cooperative bank to start this shop. ...There are no government jobs available anymore for my children. All new job openings are reserved for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (see chapter three). And there is nothing much left in farming either. I am enough to do it. At harvest or sowing I get my sons to help me but otherwise they are not required. When the land will be sub-divided what will each one get out of it?”

Sharad told me during my visit in April 2008 that he wants to do an MBA. “But I don’t know enough English to give the entrance examination,” he stated. He cannot cope with the syllabus. I asked if he took English coaching classes and he said they don’t teach the English related to management education. “I want to leave Dhar and do other things in life but an MBA is so expensive. If my family gives me money for that, it will become very difficult for them in the village. I also have a responsibility at home.” Moreover, his family wants him to get married soon so that his wife can come and relieve his mother from the burden of household chores. If he left, there would be excessive burden on his parents and younger brother and he is in two minds about his future.

Kanak is Sharad’s first cousin and the only son of Harivansh Rathod. He is very good at studies and completed his 12<sup>th</sup> grade from the “School of Excellence” for bright students in Dhar. Kanak doesn’t help on the farm and is keen to pursue a university education. He applied for entrance examinations to medical and technical colleges for

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admission in 2008. He hopes to get into a medical college and become a doctor. He had joined Dhar's premier English Speaking Course, *La Pinakin*. Harivansh Rathod says, "for his education, I need to give attention to him, get him enrolled in tuition classes on time, bring him the things he needs. The child also needs to have talent. Kanak got good results in 5<sup>th</sup> standard and 10<sup>th</sup> standard board exams." Harivansh Rathod is almost 60. He retired from Madhya Pradesh government service in 2008 as a multipurpose village health worker. He has two married daughters and a third daughter, who is studying B.A. by correspondence. He grows soyabean on his 2 hectares during *kharif* with outside help and leases out his land to his brothers during winter. Harivansh Rathod has been able to afford Kanak's education because he has a side business of selling milk and milk products to villagers as well as the income (and now pension) from his government job. He will probably lease his land permanently to his brothers or sell it to them in the future.

Rajesh, the son of Dheeraj Singh Rathod has been trying to pursue academics but unsuccessfully. He enrolled in the "School of Excellence" in Dhar and from there he was selected to the Dhar technical college for 12<sup>th</sup> standard on a merit scholarship. After graduation, "I applied to engineering colleges," explained Rajesh, "and would have got a seat under the 33% quota reserved for graduates from technical schools. But I was a general category student [upper caste Rajput] and did not get a scholarship. I would need to pay Rs. 30-40,000 per year as fees, which I could not afford. My father's illness and sister's death had left us struggling for money." His father underwent an operation for cancer of the mouth caused by excessive smoking and chewing tobacco. One of his sisters died in childbirth leaving behind a young baby girl while the second sister gave birth to a boy with backward feet. Dheeraj Singh spent several lakh rupees on medical bills and was unable to take care of his farming. In 2006 he was neck deep in loans.

Rajesh started working in Dhar that year, first with a financier cum broker and then with an auto parts garage for one year. He always wanted to get away from the village but in January 2007 he got the opportunity to teach in the Ranipura village school as a temporary teacher for one semester. “I came back and worked hard for 4 months, took extra tuitions for 5<sup>th</sup> standard children and the exam result was also good.” But even at the end of the year he was not paid by the government nor was he hired again. Meanwhile he had started a B.Sc. degree, paying for it on his own. His father lamented, “He had always been good at studies in school but he failed his first year B.Sc. exams [twice]. He did not take tuitions and did not get the correct books. He only studied from the *kunji* (guide books). ...He has to handle his own education.” Finally in January 2008, Rajesh got a job as a teacher at a private school in Dhar through the recommendation of my field research assistant. He planned to shift permanently to Dhar in August 2008. Rajesh hopes to apply to the Navy after becoming a graduate.

Amongst the 17 Rajput cousins there are 11 young men of working age, apart from Sharad, Pawan, and Rajesh. Two are tractor mechanics, one repairs computer hardware, and two are government school teachers. Only three cousins in this generation are into farming full-time, including Sharad’s younger brother Himesh. These young Rajput men sport the stylish bootleg fashion shaded jeans and long sleeved body hugging T-shirts. They frequently go to Dhar and “hang out” with “city” kids. Partha Chatterjee (2008) argues that the penetration of government technologies of education, health, agriculture etc., and of the media and communication technologies has transformed the desires of somewhat-educated village youth, who do not want to live the life of a peasant anymore and want to move to the anonymity of the town, despite the hardships it would entail.



Yet, the aspirations of these young Rajputs are strongly shaped by the fragmented nature of their landholdings and the reality that the village does not have much to offer them. None of the Rathod boys would consider manual labour for wages as a choice of work in the village or outside, although working on their own farm would be an exception. During the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) work in Ranipura in 2007, where all households regardless of caste were provided with the opportunity for manual wage labour by the government, none of the Rajput boys were seen working. The only exception was Pawan Rathod, Rajesh's elder brother, who was the supervisor entering attendance details in a register and making payments to all the labourers.

Despite having fallen on hard times, the Rajput families in Ranipura retain their caste pride and exhibit an attitude of being the most cultured social group in the village. Their ancestors were the patrons of the village who hired labour and never went to the fields. Today, most of the brothers cannot afford to keep full-time servants like in the past and hire labourers only on a temporary basis. Their wives work in the fields with them—a fact, which causes considerable slight to their prestige. Despite the hardship, Rajput men do not sell their physical labour to others. They expect respect [*izzat*] from villagers and continue to hold sway [*rutba*] over village affairs because of their superior social position in the caste hierarchy.

When I first saw Nahaar Makwana's father, Panchilalji, he was sitting quietly at one end of the Ram temple in Ranipura in tattered clothes wearing the look of a shriveled old man. This was my first visit to Ranipura and I had been introduced to group of Rathod, Maru and Jat men who, I was told, would be happy to talk to me about soyabean

agriculture. Panchilalji was a non-entity at that temple discussion—he simply merged into the background. The Rajputs told me that I won't learn much about cultivation from any adivasi farmers when I expressed my desire to meet them. Adivasis do not have the prestige or authority that Rajputs hold in the village. They are used to sitting on the floor when upper castes sit on the cot. Rajputs themselves recall days when lower castes had to sit down in front of upper caste men, waste time waiting, and then humbly request for help or work [*gidgidao*]. Food and water was never shared between them and upper castes.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike a majority of the Rajput brothers, none of the Makwana households, including Nahaar, lived in a *pacca* house. Their houses were built of unburnt bricks covered with mud—small, one room units with a kitchen on one side and space for tying animals in the same room on the other side. The Rajputs lived in *pacca* houses with two or more rooms and separate areas for keeping their animals. They also had 'modern' furniture such as beds and steel cupboards and most brothers had built *pacca* latrines. The Makwanas had jute cots and straw mats [*chataais*] and mud enclosures to store grain and valuables. They did not have *pacca* latrines.

When I visited the Makwanas at the start of my fieldwork, they were most subservient and slightly fearful of me. Kedar and his uncle Panchilalji sat on the floor while I sat on a cot in front of their mud house. The kids playing nearby were not fully clothed, their hair unkempt and they seemed unclean. They were playing with slippers (*chappals*), with the wheel of a *dora* (weeding equipment), with pieces of string, with all kinds of things that I felt could hurt them. On the second visit, after my assistant Bhosleji's prodding, Panchilalji sat on the same cot as Bhosleji and seemed much more

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dheeraj Singh and Virendra Singh Rathod, August 5, 2006.

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lively and animated. He talked a lot and seemed in command over the younger generations sitting around him. His brother Gendaramji sat behind him on the cot. Another brother Kaniramji joined later but he sat on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Almost three months later, during a subsequent visit, Panchilalji was sitting on the floor and I said he can sit on the same charpoy as me. So half an hour through he climbed up. Although he was my grandfather's age, since I was a young woman, I was surprised when he soon stretched his legs in the back! I am sure other villagers must have been amused as the charpoy was in view of the main road entering the village.<sup>9</sup>

Nahaar passed his 10<sup>th</sup> grade exams in 2008. His cousin Kedar had completed 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Nahaar usually dressed in jeans and T-shirts and hung out with Sharad Rathod and others in the village in the evenings. Nahaar and his elder brother were almost as prosperous as Sharad's family. They owned a motorcycle, a colour television, a mobile phone, a biogas, a tubewell and most bullock related farm implements. Along with his cousins from the younger generation, Nahaar freely sat at the Ram temple during non-religious events. He even participated with upper caste young men in serving the food and water during village events such as weddings.

Yet, Nahaar and Anup were an aberration amongst the Makwanas and other adivasis in Ranipura. Out of 25 cousins of Nahaar, 13 were dependent upon income from tiny plots of land less than 1 hectare each and supplemented that with agricultural labour in the village or work for wages under the NREGS scheme of the government. Eight more had given up farming altogether and had moved as manual labourers or daily wage

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<sup>8</sup> Visit on April 29, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Visit on July 12, 2006.

workers to Dhar. Only two of these eight had retained their plots of land and leased them out to their brothers. The others were landless. A majority of them were uneducated.

Being semi-educated Nahaar could think of applying for a government job, like four of his cousins who had benefited from reservations. Yet, as described in chapter three, he was unsuccessful in obtaining one. At the same time, he did not hesitate to work as a manual labourer on the road being built in Ranipura under the NREGS. He also did not express a strong desire to leave the village like the Rajput boys did. But he did go to Pithampur, the industrial township, along with a few other young men from Ranipura, only to come back disappointed.

Nahaar represents a small number of adivasi youth who are somewhat educated and are financially equivalent in status to some middle-income upper caste families in the village, yet they occupy a liminal space on the boundary. Their experience with urban enclaves like SEZs is similar to that faced by upper caste youth but being adivasi, their social status in the village is still linked to their uneducated, poor adivasi cousins. Nahaar and Anup became closely involved in *Swadhyay*, the religious revivalist movement in Ranipura, in the last two years and found it to be an important alternative avenue to overcome this sense of social exclusion. I discuss *Swadhyay* in the later part of this chapter.

Before that I want to discuss the experience of some of the semi-educated young men described above in the industrial township of Pithampur. I argue that their education gives them an expectation that they do not have to do manual work, whether in agriculture or elsewhere, anymore. But at the same time, they do not have the requisite skills to participate in the industrial or the service economy nor have they got the opportunities to hone skills such as learning English or operating computers. This puts

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them in a liminal space where, they are not recognized either as part of the rural or the urban economy—they fall into the cracks when development projects are constructed along divisions such as urban and rural.

### **Joining an Industrial Workforce: The Special Economic Zone (SEZ)**

In Madhya Pradesh, under a Backward District Development Scheme, an industrial township was developed in Pithampur in Dhar district in the 1980s. In last few years it has been converted into a special economic zone (SEZ). This research shows that young men who migrate away from the village find that they are unable to participate in urban enclaves like SEZs where financial aspirations collide with incapability and loneliness. Contrary to expectations, these young people are finding themselves drawn back to the village—to family support, a cleaner environment, and daily fulfillment of basic needs like food and shelter.

An SEZ is a Special Economic Zone, where industry is given special concessions and preferentially provided with subsidized land, electricity, and water. Dhar has one of the oldest such SEZs in the tehsil known as Pithampur, which was conceived in 1982-83 under the Arjun Singh (Congress) government in MP and started in 1984 with a cold storage unit. It was launched under the Backward District Scheme hence placed in Dhar district but it is just 22 km from Indore city. There is no railway line connecting Dhar and Pithampur to Indore so everything is transported through trucks by road. In 2006, MAN AG, Germany's premier transport and engineering company opened one of the largest truck manufacturing plants in Asia known as Force Motors in Pithampur. The SEZ has become the [erstwhile] Detroit of India, i.e. a major automobile manufacturing hub along with several other factories, including soyabean processing, plastics, and textiles.

The SEZ is an enclave created by the state ostensibly to provide jobs in rural areas and bring employment for semi-educated young people like Nahaar and Sharad. Nahaar's poorer illiterate cousins cannot hope to get a salaried job as a worker or foreman in the factories—they are only qualified for manual work. But according to Karan Singh Pawar, the erstwhile Raja of Dhar and an ex-Congress MLA, "The factory environment is alien to the rural farmer."<sup>10</sup> The stories of Nahaar, Narendra, and Deepak are quite illuminating along these lines. The problems they face are related to health and safety, to poor pay compared to the cost of living, to difficult timings, and unsurprisingly, to urban loneliness.

Nahaar spent a few months trying out different jobs in Pithampur with his sister's husband who worked in a plastics factory there. He narrated his story which started with work in a medicine factory. "I stayed there only for two days because the work was with acid. It would fall all over and I could have burned my hands and feet. Then my *jija* (sister's husband) got me a night shift in the plastics factory where he was working, which I refused." He didn't want to work at night. Then he was offered the job of a gatekeeper, which he did not like, and finally he tried his hand in a diamond factory. After 4-5 days, he quit because the diamond dust [*chura*] would hurt the eyes. Nahaar did not discount Pithampur altogether despite his past experiences. "My *jija's jija* is still there and he is calling me. I want to go but my family has stopped me because of our family dispute in Ranipura," he explained towards the end of our conversation.<sup>11</sup>

Nahaar is not the only one who has tried his hand in Pithampur and come back to the village. Lakhan, the son of Abhinash Jat, ran away and came back home leaving an

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<sup>10</sup> Interview April 18-19, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Nahaar was referring to a land dispute that was in progress between different members of his own extended family.

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overseer's job in Pithampur. His father along with Panditji, the priest of Ranipura had gone to seek the help of Karan Singh Pawar to find jobs in Pithampur for their sons. Lakhan and Kanhaiya got jobs in a polyethylene bag factory with a salary of 1900 Rs per month. Panditji had explained to me with great enthusiasm that with a bonus, savings in a provident fund, and with overtime, the total salary could go up to Rs. 3000 a month. But Abhinash Jat's son came back within a few months because he didn't like it there, living all alone away from family, cooking for oneself. Abhinash Jat expressed his frustration to my research assistant one day. He said, "I will tell madam to take my elder son to Delhi with her. He is a rogue [*badmash*]. He came back from Pithampur. With such difficulty I had arranged a job for him by taking a favour from Babasahab (Karan Singh Pawar) [Babasahab *ko bol ke*]. He doesn't work here in the fields also. I am very troubled [*pareshan*] by him." Kanhaiya stayed on in Pithampur but he too left after a year and a half because most of the money he was making went into paying for rent and living expenses. The bonus and overtime did not materialise.

The only young man from Ranipura who has settled down successfully in Pithampur is Vijay Mana, an adivasi whose father died of alcoholism and whose mother and three younger brothers make up the poorest family in Ranipura. Vijay works as a mason with his uncle from another village. He got married in 2007 and took his wife with him. He is staying in a rented house and has even bought a mobile phone. He says there is enough construction work to keep him busy most of the time.

Some middle-aged Rajput farmers suggested to me that living in the village would give people a better lifestyle than the city. There is open space, less congestion [*khuli hava*], clean air, no pollution, no dearth of fresh food (unless there is massive drought),

security and safety, community and family.<sup>12</sup> If good transportation and roads, communication such as telephones,<sup>13</sup> as well as medical help and good education are available in the village itself, people would not want to migrate to the cities, they argued. Dipankar Gupta (2005) has provocatively written about the demise of the Indian village as a cultural and sociological phenomenon. He argues that growing numbers of villagers are dependent upon non-agrarian sources for income and agriculture has stagnated in most parts of the country. But young people like Sharad and Nahaar, although they sought out the opportunities of the city or town, expressed a conflicting desire not to part with the quality of life and support system provided by the village. Thus, even though agriculture may not end up being the main source of income for a large number of villagers, the village may continue to remain a sociological entity—it would be almost akin to western suburbanization but bypassing the step of urbanization altogether.

The SEZ has provided very little benefit for Dhar according to Karan Singh Pawar who has played an important role in the smooth functioning of the SEZ over the last 20 years. He says there are hardly any people from Dhar working in the companies and factories in Pithampur; most are from other parts of India. The problem, according to him is a dearth of skilled workers in Dhar. The requisite skill levels to participate in the urban industrial economy beyond the level of a manual worker, i.e. to become a factory foreman or supervisor are absent. Even if rural students may have completed middle school or high school, their bookish knowledge is of no use in these skill-oriented jobs.

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<sup>12</sup> The village is still an important sociological phenomenon where kinship ties are a critical source of support. Such ties are valuable even in urban slums and squatter settlements, although to a lesser degree. The moral economy inherent in patron-client relationships is still visible to some extent between farmers and labourers who are hired monthly or annually. But even for those who do not work for others in the village, extended family relationships provide a support system on a daily basis, despite constant disputes and conflicts inherent in such kinship relationships. The desire for urban anonymity and the need to get away from constant social interference in the village is at the same time tempered by urban experiences of loneliness and struggle.

<sup>13</sup> Spiraling mobile phone ownership since 2007 has rapidly fulfilled this condition in the last 2 years.



Companies do provide initial training for jobs but because of overall poor level of skill development, most potential candidates from Dhar do not get selected according to Pawar. Any other managerial level job requires a modicum of English, which is absent wholesale from Dhar. Although there are a handful of “English Speaking Classes,” their focus on everyday conversation does not help students like Sharad who want to learn the English required to study for an MBA degree and who may want to be a manager someday. Even though Sharad may have the innate abilities to hold a white collar job, he does not have the stepping stones in front of him to take that path. Laments Pawar, “The SEZs in Madhya Pradesh have been successful as satellite cities of the three big towns—Indore, Bhopal and Jabalpur. But as a rural policy, they have had no impact.” Rather than an opportunity for rural youth, the SEZ typically functions as a satellite to an urban center where skilled workers from far off urban peripheries find jobs and the product of their labour is sent back outside.

Even if the skill levels may be developed amongst these young men from Ranipura, it is unclear where a policy of setting up industries in backward districts is sustainable in the long run. In a “backward” district like Dhar there is no local raw material available and neither is there local human capital (apart from manual labour), everything comes from outside. This can create circumstances where the economics of production do not work out. For instance, in the 1980s, the state-run Madhya Pradesh Oil Federation built two soyabean and oil processing plants in “backward” districts. Unfortunately, the location of the plants was based not on proximity to soyabean growing areas or ports of export or soyabean processing facilities. A vanaspati (solidified oil, a substitute for clarified butter or *ghee*) plant was established in Churhat, in Sidhi district, more than a 1200 km from Sehore, the closest processing plant which supplied it with

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crude oil. Not only was it a backward district, Churhat was also the constituency of Arjun Singh, the chief minister of MP from 1980 to 1985 and is the Minister for Human Resource Development in the current Congress government in Delhi. The finished product was sent back to Indore because the marketing branch of the Oilfed was located there. It was obvious that the prohibitive transportation cost (especially with the poor rail and road infrastructure in MP) would make the vanaspati plant unprofitable.<sup>14</sup> Another plant was opened in Chhindwara, again a backward district as well as the constituency of Kamal Nath, the current Congress government's commerce minister. The plant was located on top of a hill. Somehow, the technical viability report, which should have been negative, was positive.<sup>15</sup>

If implemented with some foresight, the backward district policy might have led to profitable industrialization instead of creating a trail of white elephants. There was, in fact, a "no industry district" policy where private enterprises were given concessions and subsidies to establish factories. O.P. Goel, the ex-President of the Soyabean Processors Association (SOPA) started his factory, Krishna Oil Extraction Limited, under this scheme in Pachor tehsil of Rajgarh district. This falls at the outer edge of the fertile Malwa plateau where most of the soyabean is grown in Madhya Pradesh. His plant benefited from the policy and was profitable.<sup>16</sup> But Pithampur as an SEZ survives because it is linked to the city of Indore from where it can access the railway network to source raw materials such as steel and aluminium and send out finished goods such as cars and trucks. Very few local persons from Dhar have set up industries in Pithampur and hardly any of them have been successful, according to Pawar.

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<sup>14</sup> Mr. Shaheed of Dhar and Mr. Rana of Indore, both worked for the Oil Federation in the 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Mr. Rana, Indore.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, 28 February 2006.

Finally, even ancillary economic effects on local commerce, retail, transport etc., that one would expect from an SEZ are also unfortunately not found in Pithampur. The factories are self-sustained campuses within themselves, preferring to have their own canteens, own transportation fleets, and own residential compounds (if at all). They are able to provide quality support to their staff, which the poor public infrastructure of Dhar cannot provide. In fact, most of the infrastructure in Pithampur *tehsil*, such as road maintenance and power backup, has been paid for by the companies themselves, according to Pawar; the government of Dhar has had a very small role to play. Moreover, since the SEZ comes under special tax rules and is exempted from duties, the local government does not receive much in the way of remuneration from these companies. In fact, the sales tax office of Pithampur *tehsil* is actually in Indore, not in Dhar town. Pawar estimates that the local economy generated via the SEZ is not more than 5% of the entire turnover of Pithampur. This includes those people who may be deriving salaries as drivers or gatekeepers, or earning through retail as shopkeepers in Pithampur, as well as manual construction workers, mostly adivasis from other districts of Dhar who abound.<sup>17</sup>

All that a backward district can provide is land and it is easier to acquire land for industrial development in “backward” district. The SEZ was established in a somewhat hilly area of Dhar and the state government played an important role in obtaining the land. Ironically, the SEZ exists because it was able to obtain land in a “backward” district like Dhar, but it survives because it is close to the commercial city of Indore from where it can source skilled manpower, raw materials, and a market for finished goods.

Nahaar, Sharad, Lakhan and Kanhaiya are part of a growing group of youth who are finding themselves displaced from agriculture altogether and unable to share in the

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, April 18-19, 2007.

benefits accruing to Malwa through the yellow revolution. At the same time, they have been unable to find the kind of work they want to do in the urban economy. They are joining the ranks of a rural proletariat that is a mute participant, marginalized without requisite skills to meaningfully participate and without the power to make its voice heard above those of rural agricultural elites. This proletariat is finding itself increasingly invisible, expendable, and outcast from narratives of development that focus specifically on the rural through agricultural interventions or on the urban through industrial projects—a dichotomy that leaves these young people in the middle of nowhere.

### **Bypassed by the Yellow Revolution: Women in Malwa**

Discussions of the rural and specifically, the yellow revolution, subsume women within the category of “the farmer.” It is assumed that when the discussion is about upper caste farmers or lower caste labourers, their wives and female family members are all part of “the male farmer/labourer” and are affected in the same way. In contrast, this research shows, the yellow revolution has for all intents and purposes, not significantly benefited women of all castes in Ranipura. The shift to growing soyabean has transferred control over household resources to the male domain and reduced the access of women to the fruits of their labour, except through mediation with men (cf. Agarwal 1994).

Soyabean is a cash crop and its value can only be realised by selling it for cash through an intermediary in the village or taking it to the market yard, activities which are conducted almost always by men. Women do not ordinarily go to the market yard nor interact with traders in the village—their husbands, brothers, sons, or other male family members do so. But women’s labour is crucial to the growing of soyabean. In those families using bullocks and family labour to farm, women participate in the sowing alongside men as two people are needed for the task. They also complete the weeding by

themselves, usually when men are working on other farmers' lands in the village spraying pesticide or hoeing. Most such women also go to work in soyabean fields of others for weeding. Families with a large amount of land sow soyabean using borrowed or self-owned tractors and they hire labourers to weed, hoe, and spray pesticides. But their women supervise these labourers and often participate in the weeding alongside. At the harvest all women, regardless of whether they belong to tractor families or bullock families, work alongside agricultural labourers in harvesting the crop with sickles, working in the sun all day long. Male farmers do not participate in the actual process of cutting but walk alongside supervising the labourers. Women's labour is also critical for improving the quality of the soyabean crop. They are the ones who sieve the soyabean, remove impurities like small stones and foreign matter by hand and improve its quality thus, fetching a higher price for the farmer.

Yet, even though women labour longer and harder in the soyabean fields than men, they do not have direct access to the cash resulting from the sale of the crop. Other crops like lentils, vegetables, spices, and corn, unless specifically grown for the market, are directly under women's control and are often used to trade for clothing items, food or other accessories. Even wheat is commonly used within the village to conduct transactions. But although village shopkeepers take payment in soyabean, other households do not. Even though soyabean may be stored in the house as a form of savings, and even if women use it to trade, ultimately they have to entrust the task of converting it into a usable unit of value or cash to a male intermediary.

The implication of this is that even though there is availability of more cash in the village, it has not resulted in greater consumption or easing of the labour burden for women. When I first started my fieldwork in Ranipura, I could not see the "yellow

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revolution” and monetary prosperity that scientists and “good farmers” had spoken to me about. Yes, I saw tractors, several motorcycles, televisions, farm implements, tubewells, cable television antennas, and later on, mobile phones. But Rajput, Jat, Maru, and adivasi women still walked to the handpump or the water tank or a tubewell to fill water in aluminum and earthen pots and carried them back to their house on their heads. Upper and lower women still carried bundles of clothes in aluminium baskets to the pond and washed them at the edge of the spillway. 80 percent of the women still cooked food using firewood or dung cakes in mud stoves that created smoke, made them teary-eyed and caused difficulty breathing. Almost all the women cooked and cleaned and did the household work under very little light from the kerosene lamp. Even during the brightness of day, houses were pitch dark and it would take about five minutes for the eyesight to get adjusted. Most women completed all the households tasks in this light. Almost 70 percent of the women went to the bathroom out in the fields—Jat, Rajput, Maru and adivasi. A recently widowed young Jat woman’s only grievance to me was that she could not freely go to the bathroom during the day. Being a new widow she was not expected to leave her house but in this case she did not have a choice. She had to go under the cover of darkness either early morning or in the evening. A few weeks earlier we had heard of an old woman from a nearby village who died of a snake bite during one such trip. With the severe water shortages that began as a result of growing soyabean and high-yielding varieties of wheat (see chapter one), maintaining cleanliness and sanitation became an even more difficult task for women. It was worse in the summer when water needed to be brought from a handful of tubewells from far away fields as all the handpumps and tubewells in the village dried up, and everyone had to make do with using the bare minimum possible for all their needs.

It was no wonder then that most of the children in the village were poorly dressed, their clothes unkempt and unclean. Their mothers barely had time in the day to finish all the household chores, fetching water, the cooking and cleaning, washing clothes, feeding the children, taking care of guests like me, and finally heading over to the fields for weeding, cutting, supervising. Or else, cleaning the newly harvested crop, pickling fruits and vegetables, grinding spices, grinding wheat flour, gram flour or making chana dal from chickpeas. The list was endless. In all this, until they bore a male child, their reproductive responsibilities were not over.

On the other hand, it was common to see upper caste men sitting at the Tejaji temple or the Ram temple sharing gossip and playing cards. Diesel threshers reduced the threshing time spent by men from several days to several hours. Tractor sowing reduced the sowing time from a few days to a few hours. From the cash obtained with the sale of soyabean, lower caste men purchased motorcycles, mobile phones, radios and televisions. Upper caste men dug more tubewells and purchased diesel generators. But the 300 rupees every year for the electricity bill for a water tank in the village was consistently not paid on time by most upper caste families. Every day that the water tank was not functional, upper caste women walked to the handful of tubewell spouts in the village located in the houses of a few upper caste families to fill water. And this was a very frequent occurrence.



Jat and Maru women filling water pots from the tubewell behind Bharat Jat's house when the water tank was not working. July 2007. Photo by Richa Kumar.

Thus, shifting to growing soyabean has transferred control over household resources to the male domain and reduced the ability of women to directly access the fruits of their labour. Even though the yellow revolution resulted in more cash in the hands of farmers, the consumption it engendered reduced the labour burden of men and did not greatly impact the labour of women. The popularity of motorcycles, tractors, threshers, tubewells and tubewell motors, diesel generators, and other such items, alongside the absence of indoor plumbing, latrines, light bulbs in the house, domestic gas connections or biogas units, and even refrigerators and home inverters, reflected the deep gender-bias of the prosperity that came through Malwa with the yellow revolution—a gender bias that transcended class and caste.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983) has argued that domestic technologies in rural America replaced men's work with machines that could be used by women and thus, converted it into women's work. In many cases, technologies raised the expected standard of cleanliness and housekeeping rather than actually reducing the labour of women. Ronald Kline (2000) has further argued that women ended up doing more barn work and farm work rather than housework with the time saved by using new technologies. Similarly,



Suraj Jat and his brother Girijalal were the two richest households in Ranipura. Their wives laboured as long and hard as Rewa bai, the poorest adivasi widow in the village. Girijalal's wife, Savitabai expressed her frustration to me one day. In general interactions she had seemed quite spunky and upbeat, quite unlike a typical daughter-in-law with downcast eyes that I had met in other upper caste households. She never stepped out of the house but inside she seems to exhibit her freedom. Jat women had more freedom than Rajput women in terms of covering their faces, talking to outsiders, and going out of the house. But one day I asked her about the house we were sitting in. It was built of cement and concrete but it was unfinished. There were no doors or windows or any other wood work. There was no paint and no flooring. No lights or fans or electric connections. She said, what you see is in itself a big thing. "I gave an ultimatum to my husband and father-in-law that I want a new house built. I moved to the back of the old house with all my utensils. The old house leaked. I couldn't work." She got all the hay moved from the back of the old house by a labourer. She ensured that the whole house was broken. And so the new house was made. But then the money was spent. So the house just has cement and a white wash. They spent 7-8 lakh rupees already but 3-4 lakh rupees more is still needed.

In 2006, her husband sold the wheat and bought a new tractor from a bank foreclosure and a brand new thresher. He already had both a tractor and a thresher. The new set was to give out on hire to other people in the village and make some money on the side. The total cost would be about 5-6 lakh rupees approximately. "I told him to fix the house but he didn't listen," she said. "Now he's working 24 hours threshing other people's soyabean and sowing other people's wheat. I told him, you are all alone, you

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one could expect the introduction of domestic technologies in rural India to have a similar impact—women might raise their standard of living, but these technologies might still reinforce a patriarchal way of life.

won't be able to handle it, you don't have any brothers. He didn't listen. Now he comes back for lunch and dinner and shouts at me and everyone in the house, including Manju. I told him, I never asked you to buy a tractor or a thresher. So why are you yelling at me? But it is all the same." Manju is Girijalal's niece and she has come to stay in Ranipura and help out with the housework because Savitabai cannot handle it all by herself with two little children. Since Girijalal has no brothers and all his sisters are married, Savita bai has to handle the household and the family all by herself and Girijalal had to take care of his 15 hectares and the rent out business single-handed.

During another visit to their house, I saw Manju and Savitabai cleaning sacks of soyabean that had too many mud particles and sticks. They had already done 6-7 quintals and several more bags were stacked around them. I asked Girijalal, who had just stopped by, why he could not get labourers to do the work? He replied, "What will the women do in their free time at home anyway?" Later on Savita bai said, "He [Girijilal] keeps saying that women don't have any work in the house. But there are so many animals, so much animal dung I have to clean every morning, cleaning, cooking. In my mother's home [*maika*] women do not have to work so hard. In Ranipura women have so much work in the fields and at home. I don't go to the fields because of my little one but all other women have to do that also." They did not even have a television for some distraction and entertainment. Girijalal sold the old one they had and had not bought a new one till then. He simply refused to acknowledge that the women of the family worked all day and barely got any rest.

The situation of Suraj Jat's wife, Gangabai was worse. With her husband being the village Patel and interested in politics, she had guests, non-stop in her house. Suraj Jat, too, was an only son and his wife was all alone handling the housework, supervising

the farm labourers, and dealing with her difficult mother-in-law all day long. After a few months into my fieldwork when I realized her situation, every time I stayed over for lunch with my assistant and driver, I tried to help her out in the kitchen. In the summer of 2007, when I stopped by, Suraj Jat asked her to give everyone cold buttermilk [*chhaach*]. She said to him, “I don’t have cold buttermilk for everybody. If you will not buy me a fridge and an inverter, how do you expect me to keep cold buttermilk for everyone?” As if on cue, I expressed my shock to Suraj Jat asking him why he couldn’t buy her these items for a few thousand rupees when he had just spent more than one lakh rupees digging a tubewell 1000 feet deep that yielded no water? His wife responded, “He is like that only.” Some weeks later, both items were installed in the house.

A few months later during the harvest in 2007, I sat with Gangabai at the edge of one of their fields one afternoon. Labourers were harvesting the crop and Suraj Jat was supervising the threshing. Gangabai had been supervising the labourers and was tired. She started out saying, “how much can one supervise the labourers? At some point one has to trust them. But Bai [Suraj Jat’s mother] does not trust anyone. She is never satisfied with what I do. She shouts all the time, there is never any word of kindness [*daya nahi hai, vishwas nahi hai*].” I had already had my own experiences with Bai. I had learnt that Suraj Jat’s daughter Tina wanted to study further but had been taken out of school after 10<sup>th</sup> standard because Bai had raised objections. For some reason I thought, let me try to intervene. I tried to talk to Bai in a light hearted manner about Tina but Bai took it as a serious affront. She replied, albeit casually, “It does not suit us [our caste, our family] to educate girls [*Ladkiyon ko padhaana hamare ko suit nahi karta*].” Since that day Bai waged a cold war against me. Whereas in the past she had been very keen for her picture to be taken, after this episode, whenever I visited, she would not talk to me.

Gangabai continued, “There is everything that God has given us. What is it that we lack? Enough land, farms, food, house, good children, good son/husband. But there is no peace [*shanti*] in the house. Without peace it is meaningless. Ever since the day I got married Bai is this way. ... Tina is suffering. Bai doesn’t allow any tape, any music. No TV. She even shuts off the fridge saying it consumes lot of electricity, you have to stop the bill. ...She never trusts anyone. That’s why she doesn’t want to send Tina anywhere.” Tina’s two younger brothers were living in a hostel in Dhar and going to school. Tina wanted to go stay with them in the hostel, attend tuition classes and prepare for her 12<sup>th</sup> standard exams. But Bai had raised such a hue and cry that both Suraj Jat and his wife told Tina to forget about it. She was persistent and said they were sacrificing her life because of Bai. But they couldn’t do anything about it. Gangabai may be the wife of the richest farmer in Ranipura and the most powerful man in the village, yet, she felt a complete lack of control over her life and that of her daughter.

As a married woman myself, women often asked me whether my husband or my in-laws raised any objections about my work, my travel to the village, being so far away from home. I was lucky, I told them. My mother-in-law had always encouraged me to do this. My husband, too, had been most supportive about my travels—I started my fieldwork exactly two months after getting married. Women were always surprised to hear this. They would nod their head and wonder if I was really married or not. I did not wear any of the marks of a married woman—red sindoor in the parting of my hair, bangles in my hands, a round bindi on my forehead, or toe-rings in my feet. Whenever women asked me about it (no men ever questioned me directly about it but several of

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them questioned my assistant),<sup>19</sup> I would say, “Men don’t have to wear any mark to show that they are married, why should we women? I wear a ring and my husband does too. So that is my mark.” And then I would show them my ring. But a few months into my fieldwork, once women felt they had got to know me a bit more, many of them started criticizing my lack of wearing any wedding symbols. At least wear a toe-ring, they said. It is not right to be married and not wear anything. Ironically, I had been defying my own mother-in-law’s requests to wear these symbols but I acquiesced to the wishes of other married women in the village and started wearing a bangle and a toe-ring.

The rules of the gender hierarchy of patrilineality were most often implemented by women upon other women. While they would often feel constrained in their own relationships, many women did not question such hierarchies in the way someone of my social and class background would often want to do. Nevertheless, some women found a sense of freedom in participating in *Swadhyay*, the religious revivalist movement which questioned the very lines of exclusion that framed their lives. I now turn to describing *Swadhyay* and discuss the language of empowerment it provides to some women and semi-educated young adivasi men of Ranipura.

### ***Swadhyay*: Creating a Sociality of Faith**

The lines of exclusion that circumscribe the lives of people like Nahaar and Gangabai have not been challenged by the yellow revolution. Both semi-educated young adivasi men and upper caste women have tried to overcome their situation by

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<sup>19</sup> My assistant was Maharashtrian and his wife only wore a *mangalsutra* (black bead necklace) around her neck. In their caste, women did not put *sindoor*. He would tell the villagers that in Orissa (where my husband is from), women don’t have to put *sindoor*. Moreover, “Madam is from Delhi,” he would explain, “In the cities women don’t wear these things any more.” But, of course no one believed him because even on television they would see urban women in the Ekta Kapoor soap operas wearing fancy *bindis* and *mangalsutras* and *sindoor*. It was only a year after my fieldwork began that my husband visited Ranipura—and that’s when everyone truly believed that I was married.

participating in a religious revivalist movement in Ranipura, known as *Swadhyay*. *Swadhyay* is a Hindu religious movement popular in parts of western India (Hardiman 2007: 57-60) that is based on the philosophy that each person is equal—the same blood flows through all our bodies. The *Swadhyay* movement was started in the 1950s by Pandurang Shastri Athavale, a Brahmin, as a response to divisions in Indian society. Based on the fundamental teachings of the Gita, one of the holy books of Hinduism, the aim of *Swadhyay* is to make people self-aware and transcend their ego. The Gita is the sermon given by Lord Krishna to prince Arjun as he heads into the battlefield to fight against his own cousins in a battle of good against evil. It is part of the Mahabharata, one of the two main epic mythological stories of Hinduism. Athavale received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1996 (Magsayay 1996).

Kanak, the 16-year old son of Harivansh Rathod who wanted to become a doctor was one of the most enthusiastic young *Swadhyayees* in Ranipura. When asked why was he a part of *Swadhyay* when it would not help in his career or future, he replied he was a part of it for “improving his life [*jeevan vikas ke liye*]. It is a study of the self [*Swadhyay*] through meditation. We must be grateful to God for giving us this life.” *Swadhyay* first began in Ranipura in 1995 when *Swadhyayees* from Dhar came to Ranipura and stayed for 6 days. No one gave them shelter and they finally stayed at the Hanuman temple. They didn’t take food or tea from anyone and they didn’t ask anything. They just went around telling people about God, the Gita, and *Trikaal Sandhya* (the prayer of *Swadhyay*) and that we need to remember God.

Seema, a 30 year old married Rajput woman described to me how it all began. When the group came to Ranipura, Seema was at her mother’s place delivering her second child. Some people liked the *Swadhyayees* and their words while others didn’t,

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recalls Seema. Her husband and three other Rajput and Maru men were influenced by these people and decided to start a *kendra*, or a centre, in their village. Dadaji, Pandit Athavale Shastri, the founder of *Swadhyay* had recorded his teachings in videos, lectures, and other literature. Each week the *kendra* centred around one set of written or visual materials sent from Bombay by the *Swadhyay* trust. Five educated persons had to explain what they felt was the essence of the material to others in groups of 20 or so. Participants were encouraged to read and view the material, comment upon it individually and conduct a discussion in the group. There were different *kendras* for young men, older men, young girls, older women, and even children.

“When I came back to Ranipura, I did not understand why my husband used to go once a week for one hour to the *Kendra*,” said Seema. “I didn’t let him go saying let’s watch TV here or you spend time with your wife. ...Slowly slowly he tried to make me understand. I had only studied till 5<sup>th</sup> standard. I couldn’t read Hindi very well and this was Sanskrit. It took me two years to finally start figuring out the *Trikaal Sandhya*. My husband would ensure he always said it in front of me and made me say it. He would ensure we had meals together so I would say it.”

The *Trikaal Sandhya* is the foundational prayer of *Swadhyay*. According to Seema, “We must remember God at least thrice a day, while continuing to do our own work. We must say “thanks” to him. When we sleep God takes away all our memories and lets us sleep soundly. In the morning we ask God for *smriti* and get all our memories back. Before lunch we ask God for *shakti*. The food we eat is made into our “blood” and we get energy from it. Before we sleep we ask God to give us sound sleep and get *shanti*.”

The first time her husband took Seema to the temple for the *kendra*, she only went because some ladies had come in a group from Gujarat. Her fear was “what will people say that a lady is going out like that or a lady is talking?” Her fear was not unjustified. Women of the Rajput caste did not uncover their heads and faces in front of any male member in the family. Even today a Rajput widow cannot remarry even if her husband died before ever seeing her. Seema recounts how in the past ladies had to remove their shoes while crossing the Ram temple, which they invariably did several times a day to fetch water from the water tank and wash clothes in the village pond. Men didn’t have to do that. “It was so hard with the heavy load on the head and the mud. There wasn’t any road earlier. Stones used to prick (*chubhte*) the feet. ...People used to think women are like *pair ki jooti*; that women are good for nothing. They are only fit to be at the *chowki* [hearth] and raise kids.”

But Seema persisted because of the insistence of her husband. She learned to read Hindi to some extent and now, although she cannot read all the material that comes, her children and their cousins read it out to her. “We get “knowledge” about different things. We have learnt how to live a better life because of the character sketches which come as reading material. How Sita lived and how Ram lived; what it means to be a good human being. ...I have finally got the confidence to speak, to speak with outsiders [*baharwale*] like you. Earlier I would just laugh and not know what to say. Now I can talk with so much confidence, so much “knowledge”.” In the past her husband used to get angry with her and once right after marriage family elders saw her with her head partially uncovered. Her husband shouted at her and she agreed with him that women should keep fully covered, it was her fault. But after joining *Swadhyay* her husband has changed, says



Seema. “He never beat me but he used to get angry. Now he does not even get that angry.”

*Swadhyay* has a unique method of propagation. According to Balwant, another young Rajput who has completed all five levels of study of *Swadhyay* philosophy and the Gita, they take their own time, ticket, and tiffin.<sup>20</sup> Wherever they visit, they only take water and nothing else. They give freely of their time. Seema says, “once others see that we are freely giving and not asking for anything they start to change their attitude.” As a rule only couples go to other houses to talk about *Swadhyay*. Says Seema, “A woman is not so weak. She can fend for herself. Dadaji says she has eight times the strength of men. Only if the woman goes along in visiting others can the message reach inside to the hearth [*chulah*]. No one will entertain a man alone.” Seema and her husband have a set of 14 households that they visit once every fortnight, including lower caste adivasi families.

This is known as the *bhavpheri* or *bhaktipheri* [devotional visit]. Seema even had the opportunity to visit families in a village 30 km away with her husband and two other couples from Ranipura. Seema and her husband keep visiting the designated houses in the village till the couple finally agrees to come and attend the *kendra*. They handhold a couple through the prayers, the readings, and discussions. Once a couple is comfortable, Seema and her husband move on to another couple. They have been going to sit at the house of the adivasi family of Kedar Makwana and his wife (Nahaar’s cousin). Seema said that although both understood the teachings, they had not yet started coming to the *kendra* all the time.

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<sup>20</sup> Ticket refers to paying for their own travel to visit other villages and tiffin refers to the food they would carry with them when they visited.

Nahaar, on the other hand, was deeply involved in *Swadhyay* and had even traveled to Bombay and Shirdi in Maharashtra to visit the headquarters of *Swadhyay* and the temple of Sai baba. He had gone with Sitaramba Maru, one of the earlier organizers of *Swadhyay* in Ranipura. Nahaar's wife and his mother attended the *Swadhyay kendra* regularly, which was held in Anup Makwana's house. Sitaramba took the *kendra* for men and Balwant's wife took the *kendra* for women. A few older adivasi ladies attended the *kendra* but they were only beginning to understand about the movement. According to Seema, adivasis were not allowed to come and sit at the main *Swadhyay kendra* at the Ram temple. Some Rajput elders who were not part of *Swadhyay* raised objections to having them do so, hence the separate *kendra* at Anup's house. However, only somewhat educated and financially better off adivasis like Nahaar and Anup have joined the movement, wholeheartedly.

This is where the *Swadhyay* movement is foundationally challenging the lines of exclusion that frame rural society. The central philosophical idea is that "God is inside each one of us. Because of the God inside we are all divine brothers and sisters [*dev bhai bahen*]. If we behave badly towards one another [*raag dvesh*] then we are hurting that God." Hence, acts like mistreating women and discriminating against those from other castes are acts against God. This fundamental egalitarian ethic makes *Swadhyay* appealing to the oppressed. But simply having an egalitarian ethic does not bring about change. The transformational potential of *Swadhyay* is in its weekly *kendras* and its method of propagation that insists upon the direct participation of women. Kanak Rathod's elder sister Juhi is another enthusiastic *Swadhyayee*. She is the leader of the young women's *kendra* in Ranipura. She says because of *Swadhyay*, "Girls get to talk to each other, go to other people's houses, participate in debates, elocution, and even travel

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to other places. Earlier, they would not let girls even go out of the house. Girls couldn't even go talk to their female relatives in other parts of the village." Juhi is referring primarily to Rajput girls, who were under the strictest of supervision lest there be any untoward incident to scandalize the family name.

Juhi's father is completely against *Swadhyay*. He has been unsuccessfully trying to find a groom for her for the last several years. Unfortunately, in terms of marriage prospects, she is highly educated compared to other Rajput girls her age, having finished her second year Bachelor of Arts through correspondence. She is also one of the foremost young *Swadhyayees* in the village. Her father explained to my assistant during a lunch sponsored by *Swadhyay* families in the village,

"I am "against" *Swadhyay*. I have come today because all the villagers have come. ...Our relatives are angry. They are not accepting matrimonial alliances with our boys and girls. The first question I am asked when I go to see a prospective match is, which village are you from? I say Ranipura. They say there everyone is part of *Swadhyay*. Are you also part of it? [*Aap jude hain kya?*] They say we don't want a girl from that village. I am forced to lie to them saying the [Rajput] *Swadhyayees* are very distant relations, they are not from our family. But they still refuse saying that it will still have some impact on the girl's character [*us se ladki mein bhi sanskaar aayenge*]."

Juhi's father has been the most vehement and public face of opposition to *Swadhyay* in Ranipura, even against his own cousins and family members. He is a tired and frustrated old man. He failed in his efforts to find an alliance for Juhi before retiring from government service in 2008. His second daughter also stays with him because her husband has been in prison for the last few years. He may have a pacca house and enough income to feed his family and pay for Kanak's education, but with an unmarried daughter he has not yet fulfilled the most important duty of a father and fears losing self-respect and status amongst the larger Rajput community.

He further told my assistant,

“Earlier ladies would not come in front of us and would stay covered under the veil [*ladies log purdah pratha se humare saamne bahaar nahi aati thi*]. Now in *Swadhyay* they go to Dhar, they are giving lectures on the podium, they are debating. ... Outsiders say Rajput's are losing respect [*Rajput logon ki naak kat rahi hai*]. Rajputs are known for their pride [*Aan baan shaan ke liye jo Rajput log jana jate hain*]. Now Rajput ladies are going out of the house, they are going to study [*Ab Rajput ladies ghar ke bahaar nikal rahi hain, padhne likhne ja rahi hain*]. ... *Swadhyay* will spell the doom for Rajputs in the coming time [*Swadhyay le doobega Rajput logon ko aanewale samay mein*].”

It was surprising to see the resilience of Juhi and Kanak in their enthusiastic participation in *Swadhyay* against such opposition from their father. Their mother always behaved like the traditional Rajput wife and never once came out to the front of the house whenever I visited. Even when I went to the kitchen to talk to her, I would only end up talking to her daughters.

Similarly, Suraj Jat's mother has been dead against *Swadhyay* but for completely different reasons. According to Gangabai, her daughter-in-law, Bai was never involved in God much. When some *Swadhyay* couples came visiting, Bai drove them out of the house. Every Monday Seema's sister-in-law and some others would come. Gangabai liked it but Bai would keep shouting and raising objections. So finally the group shifted their meeting to the house of a Maru family next door. Gangabai started following *Swadhyay* since 2004. She recites the *Trikaal Sandhya* prayer three times a day with her daughter Tina. Her husband does not do it himself but he lets her and Tina do it. He does not stop them.

“He will come and take his food at 8:30 in the evening on his own if he sees us doing the prayer. He will not disturb. ... Bai does not understand. She doesn't have anything to do with God. She doesn't let me light even one incense stick. But I don't listen to her any longer [*Ek agarbatti nahi lagane deti. Par main nahi sunti ab*]. ... This is the work of God. Why should I not do it? I will do it. If we cannot take out 10 minutes for God from the day, what use is it?” she says.

The moral righteousness in Gangabai's words is apparent. She feels empowered enough to contradict her mother-in-law because she has been able to occupy a culturally constructed subject position where her authority comes from within the particular social

and cultural milieu of Ranipura. Although structures of meaning and positions of power can also emerge by evoking universal discourses of rights and using the language of development as entitlement, for Gangabai, these positions are unavailable. At the same time, even though it may not change her everyday life labouring from dawn to dusk, she has found within her own cultural hierarchies and inequalities, a position allowing her to express agency and feel empowered.

Vignesh Singh Rathod, the main leader of *Swadhyay* in Ranipura, expressed his anger and sadness at the response of people like Bai. We were having a conversation almost one and a half years after I started my fieldwork in Ranipura. I was trying to arrange for a female tutor to help a few girls in the village study for the 10<sup>th</sup> standard and 12<sup>th</sup> standard examinations that they were taking by correspondence. One of the girls was Suraj Jat's daughter. Another was Vigneshji's daughter. I was asking for Vigneshji's advice regarding a place we could use in the village to bring all the girls together. He suggested Suraj Jat's house as it was the only large *pacca* house in the village with a lot of space in front. Vigneshji's own house was cramped with the families of the three brothers and bags of soyabean, garlic, and wheat stacked everywhere. I responded to the suggestion saying that Bai was not keen to encourage the girls to study. That is when Vigneshji responded with veiled anger. "Bai does not understand. She does not understand God's work [*Bhagwan ke karya*]. God makes our blood, he helps us digest our food. ...Bai thinks will we get more money through this? Will we personally benefit? She only sees material things. She does not see how much she will gain inside. Having a lot of money but not having good behaviour, no kindness [*daya*], no feeling for others, what is there in such a life? Even beggars are returned from that house empty-handed."

When I had just started my fieldwork and interviewed Vigneshji for the first time, he was the one who explained *Swadhyay* to me. He was very enthusiastic and tried to enroll me into the project. I am a Hindu but my personal beliefs about religion have been very passive. I did not actively participate in rituals nor did I visit temples as part of my life routine. I bordered on the agnostic but I would celebrate festivals like Diwali and Holi. Hence, I found Vigneshji's insistence on talking to me only about *Swadhyay* rather than soyabean difficult to handle. Every time I met him he would launch into an exposition on *Swadhyay*, questioning my lack of religiosity, and emphasizing the notion that one should remember God, thank him for giving us life, and treat each other as divine brothers and sisters. A few months into my fieldwork I learnt that his daughter's studies had been terminated at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> standard. She could not go to school anymore to finish her 10<sup>th</sup> standard. His son was in 10<sup>th</sup> standard in the same school. I asked him, "Couldn't they walk the one kilometer distance together?" His mother replied, "She can only go if there are other girls her age going to school also." I responded that two girls from the Maru caste were studying in 9<sup>th</sup> standard in the same school. At this his mother said, "She cannot go with the Maru girls because they are not from our caste." My immediate response was how can this be the case for your own family when you are a part of *Swadhyay*? Vigneshji said, "Not everyone is a part of it, maybe not even everyone in my family." For the moment forgetting about *Swadhyay*, he emphasized the social demands of his caste and need for maintaining Rajput honour—his desire not to forego the respect, the honour, the pride. He said, "Our [caste's] standards are very high. There is so much delicateness [*bareeki*] involved in our caste that you have to be very careful. If something is done by one son or daughter then the entire family is outcasted from the Rajput *samaj* [caste]."

When a year later, I was trying to find a female tutor for the girls, I asked Vigneshji for his support. We needed a place to use as a school. That is when Vigneshji suggested the use of Suraj Jat's house. I told him I had found a young woman in Dhar who was willing to come to Ranipura once a week and teach the girls for the next six months until the examinations. Although initially I thought that Vigneshji would be supportive, when he heard that I had found a lady tutor, he became uncomfortable. He told me in no uncertain terms that so far my reputation in the village had been very good, but if something untoward happened, then he would not be responsible for the consequences. "Make sure that the madam you bring has a good character. She should not have loose moral character." I was taken aback. He was telling me that my reputation would be at stake. Everything I had built up in the last one and a half years would come to naught. He said, "I am telling you this because you are like our family. Otherwise no one in the village will say this to you." At one level I felt good that he opened up and told me this directly. I responded by saying, "I am glad you told me this. We will try our best but we need your help and support. If possible can you vet the character of the potential teacher in Dhar since you know people there? If something is wrong we will change her." He replied, "If something is wrong we will not send our girl. If others want to send, it's their choice." Here I was taken aback. He was simply washing his hands off the whole thing. I said, "Don't do that...if you take your girl out, others will also not send their girls. So it won't work out anyway."

Ultimately, despite all the interventions of *Swadhyay*, women were still considered to be the crucible of the morality and honour of the men and caste pride of the Rajputs was paramount. *Swadhyay* questioned the very basic cultural self-perceptions of Rajputs as conservative patriarchs. One could argue that even though Vigneshji believes

in the egalitarian ethic as a philosophy, too much adherence to it will fundamentally break down the very basis of the Hindu joint family and cause more conflict in the village. Vigneshji's family is held up as the model joint family in the village where there is a single hearth and the farming is still undivided. The family has grown out of poverty through the hard work of the three brothers. Yet, Vigneshji has to contend with the fact that both his younger brothers drink alcohol excessively and have behaved badly with others in the village. If he does not exercise the power of being the eldest brother, he cannot control them and he cannot keep his own house in order. Even though Vigneshji was a faithful adherent of *Swadhyay*, everyday interactions like these brought out the contradictions inherent in his life, as he tried to maintain order through traditional patrilineal structures but at the same time advocated for equality of castes and gender within a traditional religious setup.

## Conclusion

Development, like culture, can be seen as a dominating discursive force structuring the way people think about change. At the same time, it is a project of meaning making and enabling people to empower themselves by using it as a project of claiming rights within the nation state. It is a shared vocabulary of entitlements that can be demanded. But the language of entitlement and development and the benefits of the yellow revolution have not been available to people like Seema and Gangabai. Their subordinate position in society has instead, been reinforced. Young adults like Nahaar and Sharad who do see themselves as belonging to the agrarian economy but do not have the requisite skills to fully participate in the industrializing or service economy, also fall through the cracks when rural development is approached solely through mechanisms such as the yellow revolution or the Special Economic Zone.



This chapter has tried to delineate the lives of these people who live in a space of interruptions. It has argued for paying attention to cultural projects that they participate in, which provide them with a language of empowerment and an avenue for struggling against the lines of exclusion which frame their lives. Even though the contradictions between caste pride, patriarchal values, and the values of *Swadhyay* are visible, this religious revivalist movement offers upper caste women and some semi-educated and financially better-off adivasis a socially acceptable avenue to feel empowered and assert greater control over their lives. By linking upper castes and lower castes together in ascribing to a faith based on the principle of equality, *Swadhyay* has the greatest potential for rupturing traditional hierarchies of caste and gender. The egalitarian ethic of *Swadhyay* provides a culturally framed and thus, socially acceptable model for human feeling, intention and action for people like Nahaar and Seema to follow (Ortner 1997). Seema says, “Before *Swadhyay* I didn’t know what life was meant for. Now I know what is the meaning of my life. God has given us this body and this life so that we make something of it and don’t live like animals.”

Yet, *Swadhyay* is not an avenue chosen by a majority of adivasis in Ranipura. Unlike Nahaar and Anup who are already financially somewhat better off and feel the need to be more like the upper castes, most adivasis are still struggling to make ends meet in a daily quest to find work. Adivasis have historically been caught up in webs of domination by the state, by market actors, and by structures of caste, and their mobilization until the 1990s was in the form of an indigenous right to land and resources (Baviskar 2005). But many of them in Dhar and Jhabua have been enamoured by the BJP’s version of Hindutva. Amita Baviskar, an anthropologist who studied the Narmada Bachao Andolan through the eyes of a village on the river in Jhabua writes that by joining

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the ranks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), adivasis feel empowered not only in everyday encounters but by imagining themselves as part of a hegemonic Hindu majority, rather than in a disempowered subaltern state (Baviskar 2005: 5107, 5110). Of course, such empowerment comes with a whole new dominating discursive framework of a singular Hindu identity against a Muslim other.

For the young people discussed above, both Hindutva and *Swadhyay* have provided them culturally constructed subject positions where they can exercise agency and feel empowered. But the difference between the BJP's Hindutva and Athavale's *Swadhyay* is that while one recruits by creating a hated other, the other recruits by transcending the self. Thus, it is necessary to contest a monolithic version of Hindu religious practice that subsumes all religious expression as directed towards the hatred of the other. At the same time, it suggests that there is a need to try and understand in sociological terms why such a religious revivalist movement with an egalitarian ethic and disruptive potential appeals to upper caste men, who it ostensibly seeks to disempower. I argue that it is important to pay attention to these alternative languages and cultural projects of meaning making that people pursue to resist marginalization, for there may be no other languages within the framework of development that they could use to question and subvert the lines of exclusion framing their lives.

## Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have focused on the transformations that have taken place in Malwa over the last forty years with the introduction of soyabean cultivation. Having come to the end of this journey I feel it is useful to go back once more to the beginning—to the place where I started. A few months after I began research in Dhar in 2006, I wrote the following notes about my initial impressions of the place:

When I say I am in Dhar, two hours from Indore, many Delhi-dwellers have to first figure out where is Indore in Madhya Pradesh? Dhar and Ranipura are not conjured up in the images of “India shining”—the India that is poised to take off. They are part of “India watching”—seeing where the former goes. Dhar is described as one of the most “backward” districts of MP with an adivasi population of more than 50% and with very high rates of poverty. Before my visit, I had imagined a place with poor infrastructure, very few buildings, sparsely populated, with no public transportation, frequent electricity blackouts, and no modern goods and services.

But the town defies its image that is in the minds of the urban, westernized audience. In the last year itself, Dhar got three ATM machines, gleaming new, with security guards sometimes there, sometimes just an empty chair. Over the last ten years, new housing colonies were built with houses of all sizes and styles for every budget. One of these buildings is the swanky new Airtel office, the largest mobile phone company in India that is expanding operations in Madhya Pradesh. Another is the bungalow of Lal Seth, the chickpea trader who built a fortune in the Dhar market yard. With sandstone exteriors, two large ornate gates, a manicured garden, parapets and turrets, his house looks like an import from any of Delhi’s latest colonies. Cable television and satellite dish TV are commonly available; cable wars have slashed rates for consumers, and even foreign channels are available. I suggested to my landlady’s cousin’s daughter to watch Star World or Hallmark channels for re-runs of Friends, Everybody loves Raymond, Seinfeld, etc., to get a hang of the American accent to prepare for her call centre job application.

In Ranipura, on lifetime-free, one-time 2000-rupee paid satellite dish televisions, I have watched news from all over the world with villagers whenever the electricity comes back on. Whether it is bomb blasts in Mumbai, new malls and fashion shows in Delhi, the wedding of filmstars, George Bush’s visit to India, or the Asian Games in Doha, most TV-owners are well-informed about the latest in the news. Villagers ask me about the Iraq war and about buying a new Nokia mobile phone from Delhi. They hire a digital video photographer to capture a village wedding, and dream of someday flying to Delhi on a low cost airline along with me. Young men with stylish hairdos sport fashionably shaded jeans—some imitating Mahendra Singh Dhoni, India’s new cricketing sensation.

One young man [Nahaar] showed me a book on Amway products with the photo of two Americans on the cover, and showed me a product, Apsa-80, that he is using on

his soyabean. The booklet says it's for making golf courses smooth and for giving a shine to the leaves. He said that at the meeting in Dhar they told him it will improve his soyabean quality and output. He has become a link in the chain and is trying to convince two of his cousins to also join.

I went to Dhar expecting poverty. I had heard about Dhar only through the stories about poor tribals and their experience with Gyandoot, the village cyber kiosk project sponsored by the district administration, which had failed by 2001. So when I found “modern” things like fancy houses, ATM machines, American sitcoms, satellite cable, digital videography, and even Amway, I was pleasantly surprised at how “connected” Dhar and Ranipura had become by 2006. But when I reread these notes almost two years after I had penned them down, these impressions conveyed less to me about Dhar and more about myself and my vantage position as an ethnographer.

My impressions communicated nothing about any particular characteristics of Dhar and Ranipura, nor about any teleological change that could be labeled as development. They reflected the things which I seemed to value in my own mind as representative of development—things that were linked to urban India and the west—and consequently, framed the images of what poverty should look like. I was surprised because my own images and expectations about poverty in a remote place like Dhar did not play out. Despite having spent a few years studying and working in villages across three different Indian states, I was still a representative of the urban, westernized audience with a material, visual understanding of poverty. It took me nearly three months to find a village because I wanted to find a place that *looked* poor. My family and friends emphasized in conversations that I was living in such a *poor, remote, backward* place that it did not even have a railway station.

What this research has taught me about poverty is that the emphasis on its materiality and seeing it as a “technical” problem to be fixed, as found in many discourse of development, takes away from describing it also as a product of relations of power. Those who have the power to define what poverty looks like are the ones who are able to categorize some people as poor. But once such categorization is completed, it is taken as a given characteristic of those who are deemed to be poor—a depoliticized fact that takes away from the social relationships that have constituted it and ignores any discussion of the lived experiences of people. Even if poverty is given a dimension beyond the material—by adding the factors of the human development index such as health and literacy—it still assumes that the problem is an inherent characteristic of the *person* who is poor.<sup>1</sup> Development then becomes about transforming the person and his or her physical and mental assets, lending itself quickly to judgements about the behaviour of those deemed to be poor.

Development practitioners and even critics of development have argued that the language of “development” is necessary to keep poverty as a discussable issue, which, in turn, is vital to remain engaged in questions of equity and justice (Cooper and Packard 1997). But the way in which development discourse has constructed an understanding of poverty erases any space for discussing the deeper social, economic, cultural, and political relationships that frame people’s lives. These relationships of power, of subordination and domination, circumscribe people’s choices and chances in life and are always shaping any “interventions” that development projects seek to undertake.

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<sup>1</sup> In discussions of development in Africa, much focus is on poor *societies* as opposed to poor *people*. In contrast, within India, given the diversity of wealth distribution and multiple axes of social exclusion, poverty has usually been about poor people—with the recognition that large groups amongst the poor also inhabit other social categories such as adivasi, lower caste, or even rural.

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to critique the erasure of questions of power from the discussion of development projects and development discourse. I have argued that the teleological narrative of development through the yellow revolution in Malwa in the last forty years fails to capture the imbrication of multiple human and non-human actors and their contingent circumstances that result in agrarian change. Instead, the narrative of the yellow revolution helps powerful state and market actors to appropriate the entire agency for bringing about change. In addition, its evolutionary bias does not provide space to include accounts of decline alongside narratives of prosperity, which form an inherent part of agrarian change as described and experienced by farmers in Malwa. I also argue that the triumphant narrative of the yellow revolution fails to recognize that the monetary benefits from the yellow revolution have bypassed most women in Malwa compared to their male counterparts. The shift to growing a cash crop has also shifted control over household resources into the domain of men, thus disempowering women even further in an already unequal patrilineal society.

I have further argued that the discourse of “empowering” farmers by providing them with market information, which has resulted from the availability of new information and communication technologies alongside an increasingly popular neoliberal view of markets in the last decade, views “empowerment” as narrowly transactional and ignores larger processes of disempowerment that are shaping farmers’ actions in agrarian markets. Finally, I have shown that state-promoted programs and schemes for the development of adivasis, the poorest and most marginalized social group in India, who form nearly one-fifth of the population of Madhya Pradesh, have failed miserably. Their failure, I argue, is not only because they were implemented by

prejudiced upper caste officials, but also because of their inherent top-down nature that did not involve adivasis in any aspect of design or implementation.

Instead, I have suggested that in thinking about change, we shift the emphasis towards the agency of those who are usually the “targets” of development. I have done so, however, in ways different from ideas of agency in participatory and entrepreneurial models of development. By recovering and foregrounding the social, economic, political and cultural projects that those considered to be poor and marginalized participate in, this research argues that such alternative arenas of struggles that are unrecognized by the language and practice development be given serious attention. I have described how since farmers do not have the power to influence the price of soyabean in the market, they instead engage in battles over weightment and judgements over quality with traders and private company employees to exercise some power over the final outcome of the sale of their crop. I have illustrated the assertive negotiations undertaken by adivasi labourers in their relationships with upper caste farmers during what I call an “economy of haste” that is created every year at the soyabean harvest. I have also suggested that the mechanism of democratic politics has been a vital arena of struggle for adivasi groups to make claims upon the state. This has resulted in the implementation of an employment guarantee act, which, in combination with the “economy of haste,” has enabled adivasi labourers to negotiate higher wages and obtain more days of employment in the last few years. Lastly, I argue that cultural projects such as Swadhyay are also important alternative arenas of struggle where women and some adivasi groups have been able to overcome the lines of exclusion that frame their lives. The egalitarian ethic of Swadhyay has enabled these

hitherto marginalized groups to assert themselves and participate on an equal footing in relation to upper caste men.

The language and practice of development has failed to recognize these alternative economic, social, political, and cultural arenas of struggle that the poor and the marginalized are engaged in themselves, and which hold great potential for bringing about social transformation. In recent years, “participation” has been at the centre of development discourse. But it is about local people participating in “our” discourse or that of the development establishment. I am interested in participating in their projects. This dissertation calls for inverting the notion of participation—how can we, outsiders, development practitioners, academics, help people in their own projects of change? While recognizing that there are multiple agents and multiple processes shaping change, could we participate in the battles that people are fighting for, struggling for, that our resources enable us to help them with? Not all such struggles may be equitable or just—some may take the shape of the project of Hindutva<sup>2</sup> while others may take the shape of Swadhyay. But unless we acknowledge these multifarious platforms as alternative arenas for debating and struggling over questions of power, the legacy of development will continue to leave a string of failed projects and unused computers in even more villages in the country.

An important question of scale arises when I suggest that we participate in people’s own projects. Postdevelopmentalists in the 1990s have argued in a similar manner, but they have denigrated everything at the national or global scale and glorified the local or the community level. In contrast, I want to emphasize that my notion of

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<sup>2</sup> I refer here to the politicized version of Hinduism espoused by the Hindu nationalist party in India, the BJP, which creates a monolithic version of Hinduism against an equally monolithic other.



participating in people's projects is not a question of scale. People's projects could take shape at a national or global scale as much as at the community or local level. For instance, political struggles to push for a legal act such as India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) represent a national level people's movement that is composed of thousands of poor adivasis and lower caste groups and their representative organisations. At the same time, my personal support to a handful of girls in Ranipura to help them fulfill their desire to pass the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exams is representative of a local project that affects just a few families in a single village. The emphasis, as this research has tried to argue, is on the locus of agency in both framing the problem and in conceptualizing the solution as well as on the recognition of the relationships of power that circumscribe any efforts to bring about change.

I have argued for using the language of "change" more broadly rather than the teleological, evolutionary language of development in describing social transformation. Change is multidirectional and it can be perceived and evaluated from a multiplicity of perspectives. This brings up the question of time. Benedict Anderson (1983) has argued that a nation-state constitutes homogeneous time which brings together citizens with a common experience of modernity as members of an imagined community. Against this, Partha Chatterjee (2004) has argued for a heterogeneous time suggesting that elites in civil society and subalterns in political society have different experiences framed within different discourses and interactions with the state. However, within Ranipura itself, which would be considered far removed from civil society altogether by Chatterjee, there exist heterogeneous experiences of time. One set of children who go to the private nursery school in the village learn to speak English. They come wearing neat uniforms

and well-combed hair, dangling plastic water bottles and learn from colourful books. Another set of children go to the *aanganwadi*, the state-run day care centre, and learn to speak Hindi. They come in torn and disheveled clothes with unkempt hair, snot running from their noses, carrying an empty tin can for the morning meal of porridge, and play with a broken bat and ball and unrecognizable rubber toys. The children in the nursery school do not go through the same experience as the children in the *aanganwadi*.



Top Left: Children attending the private nursery school in Ranipura. Top Right: Children attending the state-run *aanganwadi* in Ranipura. Bottom: Children waiting for porridge at the *aanganwadi*.

Photos by Richa Kumar.

Once they grow up, despite living in the same village these different children may not have any shared conception of the world as understood either by Anderson within the confines of a nation-state, or within the social and cultural realm, which Chatterjee

alludes towards in his discussion of political society. Rural India is a crucible of differences, even within each village, let alone across various geographic regions and cultural divides. The experience of different inhabitants within a single village may not necessarily conform even to any shared sociocultural understanding—the cross-cutting lines of exclusion along caste, class, gender, and even religion, might be too strongly militating against it.

Finally, this research has highlighted the importance of accountability. It is a question that merits further investigation from an ethnographic perspective and I have only touched upon it briefly in this dissertation. Accountability is one of the buzz words of the development apparatus of the 1990s alongside participation and civil society (Clark et al. 2003). Typically, accountability is narrowly constructed as the need to demonstrate answerability in terms of expenditure of funds for and the financing of development projects. Accountability is usually directed towards development agency heads or other decision-makers. In this research I have argued, instead, for making development projects accountable for their *outcomes* to the people they seek to “develop,” rather than solely to the donors who fund them. Doing so means rethinking issues of democratic accountability.

I have suggested paying attention to the space of democratic politics where political representatives are accountable to their constituents. In India, the strength and resilience of democratic practices has grown even more in the last decade, with increasing participation by lower castes and the poor, as well as through an explosion of political parties representing their interests. Development agencies have regularly derided democratic politics as corrupt and full of nepotism. As has been seen in Madhya Pradesh,

representatives can be co-opted by competing but more powerful interests. They can also channel benefits to their own friends and family members and they can pursue their own individual agenda separate from those who put them in power. However, the process of electoral politics and the possibilities for bringing legislative change through political mobilization offer an unparalleled avenue for making the state accountable to people and for creating a space to articulate demands using the language of development as entitlement. No matter how flawed it may be, unlike development projects, democratic politics foregrounds the power struggles that take place everyday for control over resources and makes space for accountability to flow towards people.

In this research I have tried to push for engaging with questions of deprivation and discrimination on multiple arenas of struggle derived more from the lived experiences of people. I suggest that broadening the scope of development to include multiple languages and practices and to give space to political and cultural projects, considered outside the bounds of development thus far, will be a good way to start.

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